

I R A D A W S O N

**THIS BOY
WILL NEVER
MAKE OLD
BONES**



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BONES

IRA DAWSON

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Back Cover: Ira & Myra Dawson at Atoifi

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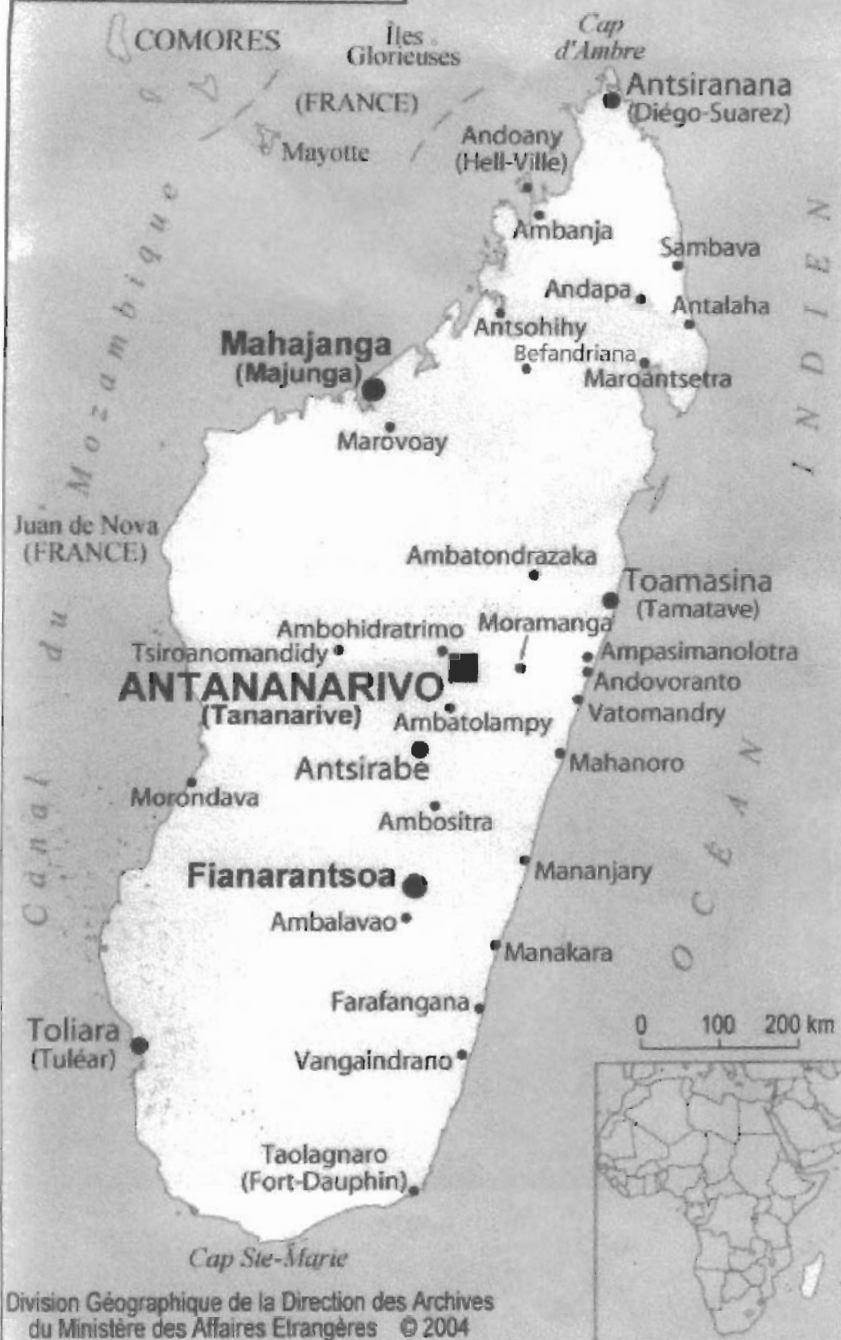
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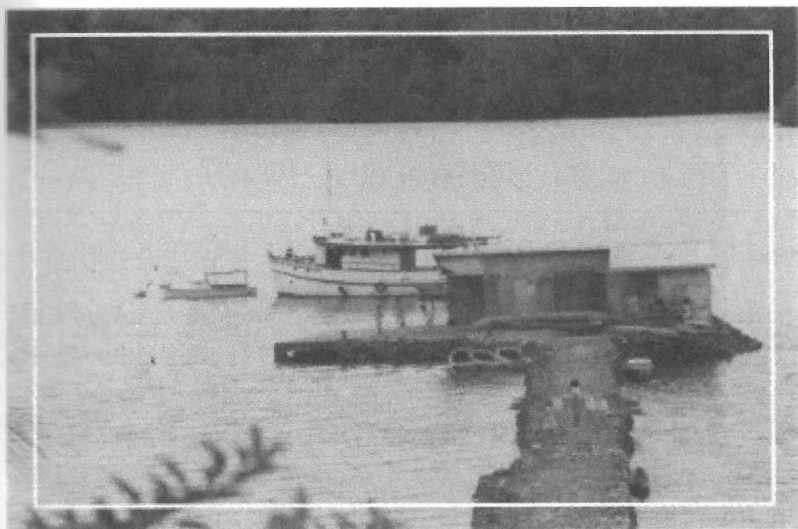
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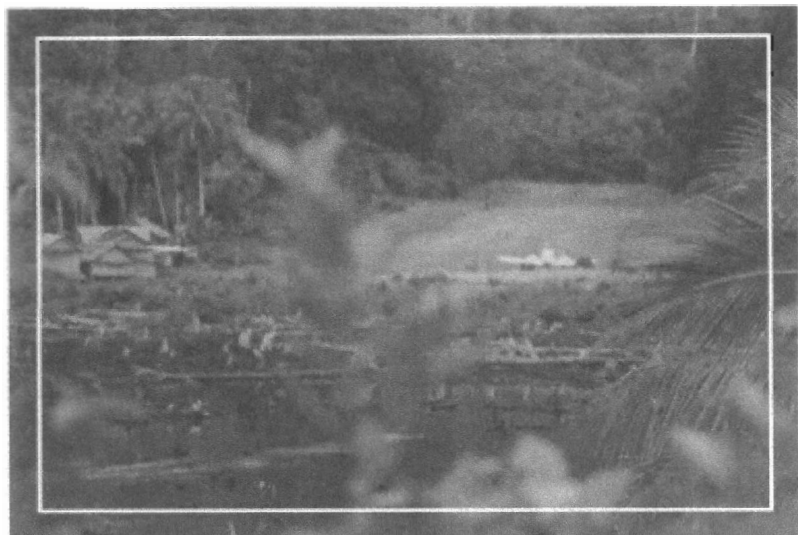
MADAGASCAR



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Old wharf and shed before cyclone



Airstrip at Atoifi

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P R E F A C E

This book has been written after many years of urging by the many people with whom I have shared some of these stories.

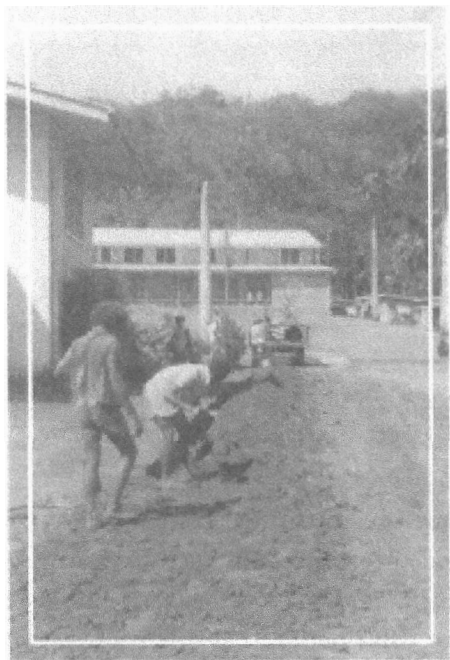
I give special thanks to the following:

To creative writing class tutor Ron Selmes of U3A Gold Coast for his advice and encouragement over the years of preparation.

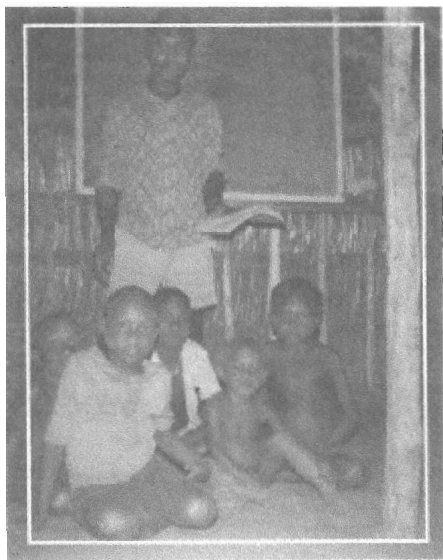
To Mary Mitchell, who gave of her time to proof read the manuscript. Your contribution is greatly appreciated.

To my wife Myra (now deceased), who followed me to these places, moving as often as required over the years, yet was still able to prepare meals from what little was available at times and shared with me many of these experiences—and who, last but not least, did the typing and the necessary revising to enable these recounted experiences to be published. None of this could have been done without you.

To my dear mother, Myra E. Dawson, who faithfully wrote every week over the years, no matter where we were located, enjoyed two trips to Atoifi, and inspired the title of this book. May you, dear Mother, rest in peace until the morning.



Underground cable laying after cyclone



New teacher and students in classroom at Karfrum

CHAPTER 1

While working as a traveller for a plastics company, I left the central New South Wales town of Cootamundra late in the afternoon, heading for Junee. I fully expected to arrive there shortly after dark; the events that lay ahead could never have been imagined. What happened would change the direction of my life forever, and all would be caused by a fog.

About six kilometres out of the town, a pea-soup fog blanketed the road. It was impossible to see any farther than one white line ahead in the centre of the road, and that was only possible with my head out the window. The road was familiar, as this was not my first time to travel it. As I drove slowly along, it soon became apparent that I should have reached the town by now, but there was not a light in sight.

For a reason that can't be explained, I stopped the vehicle with the idea of seeing where the road went to from here. Then out of the fog came a bright light, and all was clear. The car had stopped just four metres from a level crossing, and it was a goods train that was rushing by with its whistle blowing. No doubt the driver was thinking, *That idiot! Why did he stop so close to the tracks?*

The real reason was "that idiot" was well and truly lost, not even on the right road, a road he had never travelled before. As the train sped by, a cold sweat came over me, and my hair felt as if it were standing up on end. What had made me stop—what was it? There

was no real reason to stop there. Feeling that someone had really looked after me, I realized that, but for the grace of God, I would have been killed, and perhaps He had a plan for my life. My heart was filled with thankfulness to Him.

Shortly after this experience, my wife, Myra, and I took a nine-month around-the-world trip, which also contributed to changing our life's direction. This was a big experience for two average people in 1969. We would travel for seventy days overland by coach from Calcutta to London, passing through some very poor countries, one of which was Afghanistan. It was whilst journeying through there that we noticed the difficulties under which the inhabitants, in order to survive, had to work to eke out a living by planting rice in stony ground, and many others seemed to live on next to nothing from the desert.

Still thinking about this a few days later as we travelled farther on, we decided that it would be good to try to do something to assist such people to have a better life. But what could we do? That question would be answered about a year later, on our return to Australia. A very dear friend was being relocated from Sydney to Switzerland with the responsibility to care for education work in regions of Africa and Eastern Europe. Before he left, our instructions to him were "If you see anywhere in your travels where you think a couple of volunteers would be useful, mention our names, as we would be happy to serve for two years."

Quicker than we could have imagined, we received a letter requesting us to go to Madagascar. We accepted almost immediately, but then came the questions. "Where is it? What do you know about this country?" All our workmates joined in searching for the answers, with little success, until one day one of Myra's friends produced a magazine with an article on Madagascar. The author stated that it had "the colour, the shape and the fertility of a brick"! Not a glowing picture, but we went ahead with our planning and would spend eight years there.

We were located first at Ankazambo College, about six kilometres from the village of Befandriana. As our knowledge of the French language was limited to "schoolboy French," we lived with an English-speaking French family who would assist us with our language skills. Myra taught English, and I busied myself maintaining anything needing to be maintained.

Three months passed quickly as we learnt about and experienced much of this new culture. One day, having been asked to install a light in the boys' eating hall, I had to climb a bamboo ladder to reach the place where it was to be fitted, and that was the last of this episode I later remembered. Apparently, the ladder slipped, and as it fell, it seems that my head struck the corner of a table. Sometime later, a couple of students came in and found me lying on the floor. "These *vussas* [foreigners] sleep in strange places." On closer inspection, they noticed my usual ruddy complexion was now a sickly grey. They decided that all was not well and that they should carry me to the director's house. This they proceeded to do, one holding under each of my arms, carrying my unconscious body.

The chaplain asked as they were passing his house, "What are you doing?"

"The vuzza won't wake up, so we are taking him to the director's house."

Wanting to assist, the chaplain then took my dragging feet, and they continued toward the house. When the director saw this strange sight, he asked, "What's happened? What's wrong?"

"We don't know. We found him asleep, and he won't wake up."

They settled me on a bed and sent for Myra, but still no one knew what had happened.

"Has he been electrocuted?" someone asked.

"No, the generator is not on," replied another.

Two hours passed with no change, and they decided to go into Befandriana and seek some medical advice. There was a local clinic near the college with a few beds, but because of unhygienic conditions, this was not considered an option. An attempt to phone

Majunga some four hundred kilometres away was unsuccessful, and they were advised to come back tomorrow. "Maybe the phone will be working then."

After four o'clock, with no help, they returned to find me still in the same condition as when they had left. Then it was decided to move me to my own bed, and a number of students were asked to assist, as it meant carrying me on a mattress through a very narrow gate to our house.

On folding the mattress somewhat about me to enable boys and mattress to negotiate this narrow opening, they heard moans, which came from me.

They cried, "Il est mort! Il est mort!" ("He is dead! He is dead!") Eventually they placed me on my own bed where Myra again sat beside me.

Later that evening, Myra heard a knock on the door and went to answer it. Standing there was the chaplain and his wife along with a teacher and his wife, who indicated that they would like to come in to see me. Conversation was simple, everyone fearing the worst, as seven hours or more had passed with no change in my condition.

The chaplain invited all to kneel around the bed and pray. First, Myra prayed in English; next, the teacher and his wife, followed by the chaplain's wife, all praying in Malagache. All Myra could understand of the language at this stage was the word "amen." Finally, the chaplain offered his prayer, and when he concluded with "amen," I immediately sat up in bed, saying, "Bon soir" ("good evening"), and asked what everyone was doing there. I even tried to get off the bed but was prevented from doing so just then.

News of this miracle travelled far and wide. Yes, another chance would be afforded me to live longer. Once again, my dear mother's words came to me: "This boy will never make old bones."

A few more of these chances were given me throughout our days in Madagascar and later in the Solomon Islands.

* * *

"What time does your flight from Andapa airstrip depart?" Myra asked me.

"One thirty, but today it will be necessary to change planes at Sambava for a connecting flight to Tamatave. That's, of course, if it's not too cloudy for the plane to come in here. Otherwise, I'll have to take the local taxi bus to Sambava and see the best way to get down from there."

After waiting at Andapa and hearing the plane fly on overhead, it was clear that no flight would be going from here this week. Eventually, I obtained a seat on a taxi bus made to carry twelve passengers, but today, because of no plane, there would be an extra twenty hanging on wherever they could for the winding 120-kilometre trip ahead of us.

The ever-present, huge landslide across the road presented much difficulty to negotiate, but with the help of a gigantic bulldozer pulling us through and over, we eventually arrived at Sambava. There was just enough time left to get to the Air Madagascar office to arrange a flight when available to Tamatave.

"Monsieur Dawson, you are lucky. Tomorrow there's a flight to Tamatave. You will have to change planes at Antalaha, waiting only one hour for another plane to come and pick you up. This will stop at a number of small places before arriving at Tamatave, and you'll be only twenty-six hours late."

The first part of the flight in the Twin Otter was on time and very enjoyable. The hour in Antalaha soon passed, but no plane arrived. Two o'clock, three o'clock, four o'clock, and five o'clock passed with no action. It was time to check on the whereabouts of the plane.

"Oh, yes, the plane; we have lost it. The last we heard of it was that it was broken down and would be landing about ninety kilometres away, towards the centre of the island. Since then we've heard nothing more."

There being nothing more than a grass strip and no lighting, we knew that if it hadn't arrived by six o'clock, it would be unable to

land. It was about five thirty when the official came running towards me to assure me that the plane had been found and should be here before dark. Storm clouds had been gathering all afternoon on the hills over which we would have to fly, and now lightning was visible. Just as the last rays of the setting sun were showing, there in the sky appeared the Twin Otter aeroplane.

“Only passengers for Tamatave can get on.”

This was understandable as the other places had no lighting or ground-to-air communication. Darkness had already fallen by departure time, and it was hoped that the pilot could distinguish between the end of the airstrip and the beginning of the paddy fields. To reassure us, a man in white overalls was instructed to stand in the centre of the airstrip. The pilot, by keeping this man in his sights, was hopefully to be airborne before reaching him!

Both fork and chain lightning flared across the night sky, making for a colourful display, but it was not ideal for flying. Circling to get extra height over the storms did not save us from being tossed and buffeted about in our seventeen-seater plane. Lightning flashing in our windows kept the cabin lit up continuously.

Tightening our seat belts did nothing to prevent our heads being bashed against the sides of the plane ascending and descending at the same speed, leaving us wondering if it was going to break up.

Then as if we had been plucked out of the storm, we found ourselves flying calmly and smoothly. But not for long! Suddenly, the plane went into a deep descent, not a normal situation at all. Through the open cabin door, we could see that the pilot was fighting to control the plane. Something was wrong! Very wrong!

A man who had been sitting near the cabin door rushed up and spoke to the pilot. My French was good enough to hear that the tail elevator was not functioning. Despite the pilot's best efforts, we were still descending, but not as rapidly as earlier on.

It transpired that the man speaking with the pilot was the mechanic who had worked on the plane earlier in the day. Now he quickly moved into the rear luggage compartment, tossing all the

baggage and freight as far back as possible into the tail section. Next, he commenced pulling up the floorboards in an attempt to reattach the elevator cable, but first of all he had to find the missing end.

The pilot called to me, "Do you fly this route often?"

"Yes, every month."

"Come up here with me, will you?"

Hoping that I understood enough French to be helpful, I made my way into the cockpit.

The questions came, "Where is our nearest airport? This is my first day flying in Madagascar."

"There are three nearby, with none having night lights. Sambava would be our closest."

"No good. We have already lost too much altitude to go back over the mountains and are still coming down at about five degrees."

"Then Tamatave would be the nearest."

"We aren't going to make that either. We will have to ditch about fifty kilometres short. What's the coast like there?"

"There's a village called Foulpointe with a sandpit covered in pine trees, extending out into the sea for about a kilometre."

"Mayday, Mayday, Mayday. This is MD three zero six," called the pilot on his radio.

"MD three zero six, this is Antananarivo. Go ahead."

"We are going to ditch into the sea in twenty minutes about fifty kilometres north of Tamatave. Can you dispatch a search and rescue craft to assist us?"

"Sorry, MD three zero six, no one will be available until tomorrow."

"You're joking! Thanks for nothing," was the pilot's response to this.

"MD three zero six, give me a call just before you ditch, so we'll have some idea of where to search tomorrow."

"All passengers, please put on your life jackets. In about twenty minutes we will have to ditch in the sea," came the announcement from the pilot.

Twenty minutes to live! This type of plane does not have retractable wheels, and contact with the water at this angle will cause it to flip over were my thoughts.

In such a situation, one's life really goes before you, believe me. Did I really say goodbye to Myra yesterday?

I remembered again what my dear old mum said when as a child I had been diagnosed with bronchiectasis: "This boy will never make old bones." It looked as though her words were coming true that night.

Then the pilot said, "Pass me a life jacket. I'll now try to get the best height and distance possible before we go in. You realize we'll flip on contact with the water, don't you?"

"Yes, I've guessed that."

Switching on the landing lights at two hundred feet, we could see the white caps of the waves below.

"I'll call it now," the pilot quietly said. "Mayday, Mayday, Mayday. This is flight MD three zero six. In four minutes we'll be crashing into the sea. Any vessels in the area, your assistance would be appreciated. Our position is ..."

"Help me, help me quickly," I heard from the mechanic working in the rear of the aircraft.

"Go and see what you can do to help him, will you? And I'll hold off continuing our final call. Remember: only four minutes and we'll hit," were the final instructions from the pilot.

"How can I help?" I asked the mechanic.

"Hold my legs, and pull as much as you can. I've got the cable end, but I'm slipping and can't get enough pull."

Wrapping both my arms around his ankles and locking my knees in the doorway, I pulled hard.

A shout from the pilot indicated that we were succeeding. "Just a little more—you've almost got it," he called. "Just a bit more and hold it there. That's it, hold it there. We are flying level now".

It became obvious that all the pressure was being taken by a single finger of the mechanic who was grimacing with the pain.

By now, the motors had sped up, and we were flying level a little under two hundred feet. Words of encouragement came from the pilot. "We should be there in fifteen minutes. I'll call for emergency crews to be on standby."

We could hear the pilot as he called, "Tamatave, Tamatave, this is MD three zero six declaring an emergency landing at Tamatave in fifteen minutes. Please have fire appliances and ambulances standing by. We will come straight in as I cannot change course. I will use the main runway. Over."

"MD three zero six. This is traffic control Tamatave. All emergency crews have gone home, and it would take hours to get them back. You'll have to land without them standing by." The French pilot replied with words I had never heard before and I expect never to hear again. To us he said, "We are on our own. Just keep holding on, and we'll make it. The airport lights are right in front of me now. I'll call out and you can let go then."

The mechanic was groaning with the pain in his finger as he held on for what seemed to be an age. Then came the words we had been waiting for. "Let go."

A few seconds later there was a thump as our wheels crashed heavily onto the runway. We were down and were all alive. The pilot turned into the first taxiing exit and there stopped the plane, saying, "That's it, we'll leave the plane here. Everybody out, get your baggage, and we'll walk to the terminal." A silent prayer of thanks left my lips as we exited the plane.

Going over to the pilot and shaking his hand, I said, "Thanks for getting us here. and what are your plans now?"

"I'll be on a flight back to France tomorrow, this is no place for me. Thanks for your assistance. Your French is not bad for an Australian."

* * *

Next day as I walked past Air Madagascar's office, a man came out and, catching up with me, asked, "Are you Monsieur Dawson?"

I replied, "Yes." He then told me that the manageress had asked for me to come into the office.

"Are you the Monsieur Dawson who was on the plane last night that had an incident?" she asked.

Again I replied, "Yes, I was.

She then went on to explain how Air Madagascar was a government owned airline and that "no unfavourable comments are acceptable whilst you reside in this country. We appreciate the fact that you have been inconvenienced and so would ask that you accept this gift of one thousand Malagache Francs." At that time that was worth about four Australian dollars.

Air Madagascar had six of these planes numbered A to F. The plane involved in this "incident" was F. I never again flew in that plane, but about six months after our departure, F was lost, crashing somewhere, and the last I heard was that it had never been found.

Eventually, having served eight years as business manager of two mission hospitals, we returned to Australia at the end of 1979.

CHAPTER 2

Life on the Gold Coast Queensland was not really as quiet and relaxing as we had thought it would be when choosing to settle there after our eight years in Madagascar. Actually, we expected that this would be paradise. For climate, yes: but to get work, no—unless one started one's own business.

After two and a half years of running our own businesses, we were surprised one day to receive a phone call inviting us to accept a job in the Solomon Islands. The position was as business manager for a ninety-bed hospital on the island of Malaita, at a place called Atoifi.

Of course, we had heard of the hospital and were aware that the first expatriate medical worker, after being there for just ten days, had been speared and had died from his wound. After a night's reflection, our response was "Yes, we will go, but it will take three months to get our affairs in order here on the coast." This meant we would be ready to take up our duties before the end of September.

Agreements were reached to this effect, and we set about selling the two businesses we were currently running, along with arranging for a good tenant to lease our house. No, we would not sell this, which proved in hindsight to be a wise move.

Over the ensuing months questions were asked and answers received concerning the hospital, especially that of the debt owed by it. Yes, there was a debt, the first estimation being about thirty

thousand Solomon Island dollars; in 1982 that currency was about on par with the Australian dollar. Four weeks later, when we met with another person, who should accurately know, the question was again asked, and this time the answer was sixty thousand. Eventually, the exact figure was found to be over \$117,000. What a job lay ahead!

After all our medical checks were done and baggage packed and shipped, the day arrived for our departure from Brisbane. We had chosen a Wednesday flight, fully expecting that this would assure us of a few days in Honiara, before flying on to Atoifi. Not so! To our dismay word came, "Tomorrow we will take you to meet the people in Honiara whom you should know, and you'll fly to Atoifi Friday afternoon." During my visit with the "people I should know," one thing became obvious. Atoifi owed money everywhere.

"When do you think you'll be able to pay off the debt Atoifi owes?" was the question on everyone's lips.

What have I let myself in for here? was my silent question. *Should I fly to Atoifi tomorrow or back to Brisbane?*

By now the picture of this debt-ridden hospital was beginning to become clear. No wonder the job had been offered to me. Later on, it became clear that my name had been suggested by the former mission president with whom we had worked in Madagascar. With debts such as this, a miracle worker was what was required. Our prayer was "Lord, please help us."

My new president here, in charge of the Western Pacific Union Mission, was a great man whom I had never met before, but on first meeting with him I gained the impression that he was a man to be trusted and relied on. This assessment over the years was handsomely rewarded and proved to be true.

"Do what you have to, to get the place back on its feet, or we'll have to close it down. I'll help you all I can" were the remarks that rang in my ears as I left his office.

Having shared all this information with Myra, I had some doubts and misgivings as we boarded the Aztec plane for the

thirty-five-minute flight over to Malaita and then on to the little airstrip cut out of the jungle at the end of beautiful Uru Harbour. A circle over the hospital enabled the plane to lose the altitude needed to get over the mountainous terrain and gave us our first view of a new chapter in our lives; then we were down to sea level. The mud and water spray coming from our wheels signalled that we were on the ground, having landed on this grassy strip, which had been constructed on land extending down to the harbour.

* * *

So this was Atoifi, set on a hill overlooking Uru Harbour, a view with a splendour that can only be seen in the tropics with crystal-clear waters and islands dotted offshore. Atoifi means “place of quiet waters.” *The waters may be quiet, but it is what happens on the land that really is going to occupy my attention for the next five and a half years.*

After the welcomes were over at the airstrip, we were introduced to the open trailer pulled by a four-wheel-drive tractor, which was to carry us up the muddy track to our new abode. Before we had time to look the house over or to commence unpacking, many of the locals were calling at the front door to bid us welcome. How peaceful it all seemed, so far from the outside world that in fact one could almost forget it was out there somewhere. We were in a dream come true, coconut palms swaying, a million-dollar harbour view, and lovely gentle people—oh yes, this must be paradise!

These impressions, however, were short-lived with the visit of the expatriate director of nursing, whom we already knew, having worked with him previously in Madagascar. He directed my attention to a national worker's house just a hundred metres away, saying, “That was the home where Brian Dunn was speared through the chest, which ended in his death.”

This tragedy was well known. He had arrived only ten days before, the first expatriate medical worker, when he answered a

knock at the door, and a bushman thrust a spear through him. My question now was, "What had he done wrong in only ten days?" The answer revealed far more than we had previously known. Actually, it was nothing to do with Brian but a landowner squabble.

We were assured that there would be no worry with the loyalty of the staff and hospital workers, who could be relied on to protect me, but "Be sure to listen to their counsel, and be aware when problems are about in the neighbouring villages," particularly if a "swear" (as we would say, an oath) had been made. This could only be removed by a monetary payment, a gift of a number of pigs, or the murder of five local men or even better still, one white man.

How true this proved to be. Over the ensuing years, time and time again the loyalty of the workers was found to be beyond question. You, my readers, will experience as I did that they would be willing to place their lives on the line to protect me, but first things first.

This hospital consisted of a male ward, a female ward and maternity ward, and provision for a private patients ward (unusable at this time), with shower and toilet facilities for each ward. This may sound normal, but not all hospitals in the Solomon Islands could boast such luxuries. As well there was an outpatient wing and a well-equipped—by Solomon standards—laboratory and operating theatre. There was a small store where staff, patients, and neighbouring villagers could purchase simple supplies; a small X-ray room with machine and offices above the outpatients' rooms completed the building. Further away, an open-air area was available for the patients' carers to prepare their food.

Scattered around the hospital were a number of buildings housing the school of nursing, girls' and boys' dormitories, staff houses, and a shed for the diesel generating plant and the mechanic's workshop. A huge two hundred thousand litre concrete tank complete with concrete lid served as the water supply. This was supplied from a very unreliable source and, even with twenty-nine feet of rain per annum, seemed to be always low on water.

The hydro generating plant, a very ancient piece of equipment, which used a lot of water for a relatively small result, was about one kilometre from the hospital. A stream was diverted into a concrete pipeline and fed into a twenty-five-thousand-litre galvanised tank, from where it flowed through a smaller pipe down to the generator.

Near this generating plant a previous manager had been killed when the tractor he was driving overturned, causing his death. This man had done so much in developing the hydro and airstrip, and here I pay tribute to what Lens Larwood did to make life easier for those of us who have followed him. He was laid to rest at the top of the stairs that overlook the beautiful harbour and lead from the wharf up to the hospital.

The wharf is set out from the shore to allow a deep-water mooring, enabling reasonable-sized vessels to bring in supplies; which are stored in the small lockup shed or taken up to the hospital. A stone causeway is just wide enough for the tractor and trailer to be driven out to the wharf and turned around by a skilled driver.

Set in such a beautiful setting, you will find it difficult to believe the frightening events which would take place over the next five years. From the harbour to the high water tank and beyond to the faraway hills towards the centre of the island behind Atoifi, come, share with me the joys, the fears, the dangers, and the unbelievable along with the heroes of our time at Atoifi.

* * *

“Water, water everywhere and not a drop to drink” were the first words of one of my favourite poems at school. This was just the situation at the hospital. The average annual rainfall was twenty-nine feet. There was a huge underground concrete tank with a solid concrete lid as well as a number of smaller concrete tanks that received their water from roofs of various buildings; but within a week of the last rain there would be no water left. As we sometimes

would go three weeks without any rain, this caused huge problems and required urgent correction.

The water from the hydro came from a high hill about two kilometres behind the hospital, and a fifty millimetre polythene pipe from the overflow of the tank had been laid down to the generating plant, enabling the operators to know when the supply tank a kilometre away was full. Here was the solution: simply purchase another kilometre of pipe, bury it to prevent theft, and connect it to the main water tank. Never again would we be without water.

Surprises were the norm from almost day one. You never knew what was going to happen next. The first surprise came just three weeks after our arrival. I had included in my goods from Australia a four-metre aluminium boat along with a sixteen-horsepower motor. This had arrived safely and was ready for use. Word came through that some students were waiting to be picked up from Atouri about seventeen kilometres up the coast where the road ended. As it appeared that no one else was available to go at this time of day, I found myself with the job.

Three men had just arrived by dugout canoe at the wharf as I was leaving, and we greeted each other. In the middle of Uru Harbour is a small coral atoll with a few saltwater trees growing on it. As it was in a straight line for me to exit the harbour, I skirted it by about two hundred metres. Calmly steering the boat, I certainly was not prepared for what was about to happen.

One moment I was sitting there quietly; the next I was bodily picked up and forced headfirst down into the water. After what seemed an age I surfaced, but not before taking in several gulps of the very salty water. Not believing what had just occurred and in a state of shock, I looked around me. No, I did not have a life jacket on; that was in the boat! As I looked, the boat appeared to be going around slowly in a circle about fifty metres from me. Then to my utter disbelief I heard the motor rev up and the boat headed directly for me. It came so close that I had to push myself off the

side to avoid being hit by the propeller. Three times this happened before the man with the dugout was by my side taking my boat under control.

Having lived most of my life with a reduced lung capacity, not being a strong swimmer, and realizing that I had no hope of swimming to the shore, I lay on my back and floated, ceasing to struggle. Words of advice came from the man in the dugout when he came to my aid: "Island taboo. Devil man lives there. Do not go close ever, unless you have many people on board."

Meanwhile, from the vantage point of the hospital on the hill, people were saying, "There's a drunken boat in the harbour."

The ship's engineer, realizing that something was very wrong, ran about half a kilometre and then to the forty steps which led down to the wharf level, touching only about twenty of them and continuing to run to the wharf where he jumped aboard the *Raratalau*, the hospital's ship, and came to my aid.

Unbeknown to me, everyone on the compound was cautioned not to let my wife know what had taken place; she was teaching whilst all this happened. All she was told was that I had gone to pick up the nurses, and she would be unaware of the drama until I returned later.

I pulled myself together and set off to finish the task I had set out to do, against all advice. Eventually I arrived at Atouri, and having time to kill as the girls had not yet arrived, I just sat there reflecting on the past experience. A few minutes later a canoe from Atoifi arrived with two medical staff who, being worried for me, just happened along on a "fishing trip". Their thoughtfulness was greatly appreciated. The girls arrived soon after, and the return trip passed uneventfully.

That night I was forced to bed early because of great breathing difficulties caused by the amount of saltwater getting into my lungs. Drs Douglas and Graham took turns in an all-night vigil monitoring my condition.

I told Myra that night what had really happened, as everyone, except the locals who understood; thought I had slipped and fallen overboard. In fact, as the story reached headquarters, a new title was given to me: "Ira, the Commander of the Atoifi Submarine Corps". One day they would be told the real story, after many other events had taken place, but for now the new title would be quietly worn.

After prolonged consultations and discussions with department heads of staff, nursing students, and ships' crews, it soon became clear what the problems were and the solutions that would be required to solve them.

Shortly after arrival my budget was prepared for presentation at the forthcoming end of year meetings in Honiara. Changes needed to be made; they were not going to be easy, but, I reasoned that if we all worked together, a way out of the financial problems could be found.

On arriving in Honiara with the prepared budget, the reaction I received was totally unexpected. "You've only been at Atoifi about a month, and you have your budget out now. We don't usually have it out until April." Immediately I thought this could well be a contributing factor to the problems, for the financial year would commence in January.

Next, I had all my changes ready to present when the division treasurer came up from Australia. Most were accepted, but one received a definite "No way!" What caused this reaction? I had proposed starting up a "Tourist Business" to encourage interested folk in Australia and New Zealand to "Come and see the Mission Field as it is". The plan was for a hostess to meet and care for the tourists in Honiara and then arrange their flight to Atoifi for a week. The treasurer was adamant: it could not be done, it never had been done before, and "No, it will not be done now."

Not wishing to upset anyone at this time of my first meeting, I calmly replied, "That's no problem. Just provide the twelve thousand dollars budgeted for, and I'll forget the whole idea." An agreement

was eventually reached that I could do it for a trial period, “but it won’t work.” More about that later.

* * *

During this time, funds were so tight that it was necessary for me to go to Honiara and work as a plumber, my original trade, on the union campus to enable the payment of the wages. A backup water supply was needed which Atoifi Plumbing, a new entity I had created and had quoted on doing this work. So for one week each month I worked there until the job was completed. Difficult, but it put the money into the pay packets of the workers.

One of the most difficult and resented decisions made in those early days was to sell the mission ship, the *Raratalau*, which was costing the hospital too much. It was more beneficial to be able to pay the medical staff rather than a ship’s crew, which spent much of the time sitting idly at the wharf.

Another problem was encountered from some of the local chiefs when a payment system for outpatient treatment was introduced. This system was the payment of twenty cents or sweet potatoes to that value. Eventually this would be accepted, but it must be stated here that no one was ever refused treatment because of an inability to pay.

* * *

Before taking up my appointment, I had arranged for two Atoifi trained nurses to go to Australia for further training and upgrading. The first three months were to be at the Sydney Adventist Hospital (SAH), where they were to be introduced to the Australian way of nursing before moving on to various major Sydney hospitals to do further training courses.

I knew well how this change could be a daunting experience for the students in moving from one culture to another, so it was greatly appreciated that I was able to call on a family in Sydney who

would open their home and hearts to assist these girls. In fact, they came to be treated as daughters and sisters in the home, where this family, who all had a medical background at the SAH and other major hospitals, further provided invaluable assistance to these girls.

Surprisingly, in some of the hospitals where they would continue with their training, both their nationality and colour would pose some problems. At times, because they appeared different from other workmates, it was thought that they would know nothing and have even less experience. One was once asked, "What experience have you had in delivering babies?"

"Oh, I've delivered forty-eight on my own, How about you?"

"Uh, uh—I've been present when a doctor has delivered two."

The life and cultural changes were immense; use of sophisticated and high-tech instruments was foreign to them; but the return to local equipment and pay in the Solomons became at the end of studies even more difficult.

From this experience we learnt that in order to get back more practical trained nurses it would be better to send them for upgrading to a training hospital in Papua New Guinea (PNG), where the culture shock would not be so great and conditions were similar.

Of course, there were culture shocks both ways, and we too were experiencing our own at this time. Shortly after our arrival we were taken on a Saturday afternoon to visit two nearby villages. This commenced with taking a canoe to the opposite side of the harbour and through the mangrove swamps. Next we walked up a hill to the very neat village of Wyfalonga where our house girl lived.

Continuing on from here, we had to go through a long swamp which had been crisscrossed with fallen logs to make it easier for the surefooted locals to cross. Unfortunately, we had not practiced the art of walking and balancing on rounded logs over muddy swamps, and our ending up in the mud was a constant source of delight and laughter. Finally, some of the students helped Myra, but before the day was out, she was to make a really big splash!

Ambatona was the next stop, and it was here that at high tide the sea would cut the village in two. A bridge about thirty metres in length had solved this problem as it crossed the metre deep of water running under it. Its construction was of almost flat 150 millimetre planks of decking for a walkway. All appeared to be fixed to the uninitiated, until a removable plank to allow canoes to pass under at high tide was reached. Myra unknowingly stepped onto this plank, which twisted and threw her into the water with a splash and the plank on top of her.

* * *

After five months we returned to Australia to attend a wedding, having negotiated this leave before accepting the position.

On our return, many people who had different parts to play in it told us this story. On a certain day, as usual a canoe carrying medical personnel would depart for a clinic thirty-five kilometres away. The mechanic would drive the canoe, unless an experienced male nurse was able to do so. The motors were old and were known to give trouble at times; however, the mechanic had just serviced this motor and had decided he would drive this day.

After leaving the harbour, he set a course out into the open sea, passing between two islands about ten kilometres apart. About midway between the islands, the motor stopped. It would later be found that the power pack in the engine had died.

There were standard requirements when going on a clinic trip. Paddles should always be carried along with extra fuel, a bush knife, and, of course, water. But the mechanic, knowing that he had serviced the motor, felt that all would be well. All they could do now was to let the canoe drift, as they found no paddles and no water on board.

First, they tried using their hands as paddles, and soon they noticed they were drifting towards the beautiful uninhabited coral island of Lelei. They well knew that should they miss Lelei they

would just drift off into the blue ocean and be out of range of canoes from the hospital searching for them. They also realized that they would not be missed until after five p.m. when they were due back, and it was then only nine a.m.

Making every effort to get to the island despite the risk of sharks, two at a time would get into the water and swim whilst trying to pull the canoe towards the land. Eventually, the three girls and the mechanic all had to swim, pushing and pulling the canoe at the same time. Their efforts were rewarded, and they were relieved to get onto the beach.

Now, where was the bush knife? Forgotten! Naturally they had no food, as they were to be fed by the clinic staff. Like all good tropical islands, this one had coconuts growing, which are a good source of food and water. The next problem was how to cut into a green coconut without a bush knife. Being good medicos, they produced a scalpel, which enabled them to open the coconuts.

After discussing their situation, they found that the tide had changed along with the wind direction. These were both now favourable in the direction of the hospital, which normally, with an outboard motor, was a trip of forty minutes. They were able to pick up some coconut fronds, and after breaking off the top ends, they could use the larger ends as paddles.

Now they were ready to set off and were making good progress until just before dark when they realized that they had lost the battle. Both wind and tide were now taking them out the other side of Lelei, and as darkness fell, they knew that they were now left to the mercy of the elements. All they could do for themselves was pray that somehow they would be found.

Back at Atoifi, the mechanic's wife became worried that they had not returned. As the director of nursing had his own outboard motor, he quickly assembled a crew, put the canoe in the water, and set off. The first place they must go to was the clinic, not an easy trip in the dark, especially crossing the bar into the river that led to the clinic. Safely arriving there, they were told that the clinic crew

had never arrived. Perhaps they were on Lelei, but checking there revealed nothing so now there was nothing else they could do but return to Atoifi and await the dawn.

* * *

Just near midnight one of the nurses in the canoe called out, "I can hear water breaking. Is there a reef out here?"

"No, the next land is South America! No reefs out here!"

Peering into the darkness, to see what it was, they found it really was land, in fact just across the harbour from the hospital. Their prayers were answered, and they were safe.

* * *

Living in an isolated spot, you would be surprised to see who would drop in on you unexpectedly. As we had the only airstrip and radio on the east coast of Malaita, this meant Atoifi was where people seemed to frequently head for to make further connections for their transportation.

First there was the Australian high commissioner, shortly after our arrival. With a group of six people, he had made arrangements for a plane to come in about five o'clock to pick them up. However, as so often happened about that hour, the clouds rolled in bringing the afternoon rains, which meant no planes could land.

At times such as this, beds would be hastily prepared in various homes and meals served. Our guests would be made as comfortable as possible for the night. Of course, it was a good way to get to know these people, and one never knew when they might be able to assist us in return.

On one occasion, when Myra was in Australia due to a family illness and some of the other wives were also away, the English high commissioner became stranded, and I had to care for him for the night. There was no one else about to prepare an evening meal, and with cooking not being amongst my talents, there seemed to be no

other option than to get on with it. "So here goes." The only thing that came to mind was that fried eggs and chips could perhaps be the answer. Not really a meal for such a distinguished guest.

Now, think carefully. Yes, I know where the eggs are. Remember to break them into a saucer first in case they are rotten!

So far, so good. *Where is the cooking oil?* It wasn't to be found, until at last there it was, of all places, under the kitchen sink! Who would think to keep it there?

The pan was heated and the oil poured in, and what a strange happening, bubbles frothed up everywhere. As you've guessed it was washing-up detergent stored in a former cooking oil bottle. All this time the cooking oil was in a twenty-litre drum with a tap, sitting on the top of a cupboard easily seen by a housewife.

A rescue was needed, and so I sent a message to the girls' dormitory to find someone off duty. As luck would have it, Ennith, a Ni Vanuatuan, was available. Ennith and another student had stayed with us during their holidays, and she knew the run of the house. The meal went off without further problems thanks to her assistance. Later, mention was made in the hospital gossip that the manager had developed a new method of cleaning people's insides.

* * *

"Atoifi, Atoifi, this is Honiara, do you copy?"

"Go ahead, Honiara."

"Ira, there's a planeload of volunteers flying in later today to build a school in a neighbouring village. There were nine men who were unable to go by plane; these have had to be sent via Auki and over road to Atouri. Can you arrange canoes to pick them up and transport them as far as Atoifi? They should arrive there within two hours. Over."

"Roger, will do, Atoifi out."

Only two regular canoe drivers were available at such short notice, and three canoes would be required as the weather looked

uncertain, and overloading could present problems. This would be a job for the manager to make up the number.

The sea was calm enough on the way up, and the men were already there and waiting for us. They were fairly big Australians with a lot of baggage to match, which ended up being stowed in the nose cone of my canoe.

Soon we reached the open sea, but now the weather changed dramatically: a blinding squall seemed to come from nowhere. The wind and driving rain whipped up two-metre waves lashing us as we struggled to keep on course with our visibility now almost zero. Then suddenly it happened. The outboard motor popped off and into the sea. A fairly common occurrence, and safety ropes were always attached to prevent the loss of motors. It did take some time, however, to haul it back into place and get it firing.

By now the waves were already much higher and capping over us. Due to the weight and position of the baggage the motor was not strong enough to ride over these waves. Trying to run with the waves seemed to be the best option to make landfall. This proved to be useless as the canoe was swamped, and with the next wave, capsized. The other canoes went merrily on their way, completely unaware of our predicament. We all ended up in the water. An air pocket trapped under the nose canoe allowed the canoe to float upside down, and being three kilometres from the nearest shore, we had little more to do than to hang on and wait to be rescued. It could be some time before anyone realized that we were overdue; how long that would be we didn't have any idea.

The longer we waited, the more we noticed that the canoe was sinking as the trapped air was expelled.

"What's that about twenty metres away from us?" excitedly asked one of my passengers. Catching sight of what he had spotted, my heart missed a couple of beats. "Up on the canoe quickly! It's a shark!"

Everyone reacted immediately, not needing a second invitation. The shark circled, coming in closer with each circle.

“Keep your feet out of the water!”

As it closed in, we estimated it to be about four metres; not really big, but with teeth like that, it was frightening. The canoe was going down rapidly with the extra weight on it, but now there was another cry: “What’s that off to the left? Looks like a pack of sharks. We’re going to be eaten for sure!”

Looking to where he was pointing, I answered, “No, that’s not sharks. It’s a pod of dolphins.”

Six dolphins were soon circling as if summing up our situation. Then, as if one had said to the others, “It’s action time, boys!” they positioned themselves about the shark which was still circling. Then the attack began, one dolphin after another came in, hitting the shark just behind its head with their noses, until it felt outnumbered and outfoxed and began to retreat a little. Now, controlling the water closest to the canoe, they kept the shark a safe distance away. This they continued to do until we were rescued an hour or more later from the completely submerged canoe.

The storm having passed, the vessel was refloated, all aboard, and we were soon on our way again. This time the dolphins escorted us for a while and then after a final leap out of the water they were gone.

CHAPTER 3

As with all overseas workers, the time comes to move on. The Union Mission treasurer had returned to take up an appointment in Australia. This of course meant a newly appointed man would take his place in Honiara.

To enable Atoifi to get on its feet financially, I had asked the Union Committee at the first budget meeting to “freeze” the \$117,000 debt for a period of three years. Debit and credit notes was the system in use, which showed no department seeming to actually pay anything, thus making it very difficult to understand who owed whom and what was owed.

A new system was proposed by which we would be prepared to operate Atoifi's finances. Each time a debit note was raised, it was to be sent to Atoifi's account section and come past my desk for approval for payment. At the end of each month, all approved payments would be totalled and a cheque sent to cover them. Likewise, all credit notes due to the hospital were to be handled the same way. This meant that our frozen debt remained constant, and our monthly payments were met.

Apart from a few minor problems, which were sorted out by a talk over the radio with the treasurer and his staff, all went well until the arrival of a new treasurer on the scene. I had never met this man, who had taken up his appointment whilst the president was attending meetings in Australia. At this time there was an amount

of a little over eight thousand dollars due for payment to Atoifi as per arrangements already mentioned.

This treasurer just looked at the debt and then the request for money payable, saying, "There's no way you are getting any of that money." When the approval by the committee for the frozen debt was mentioned, he replied, "It may have been before, but it's not now. You can forget all that, and there will certainly be no cheque coming to Atoifi." I registered my disagreement with similar strong words, and it became apparent that difficult times were ahead.

A day later, on the radio, he really sounded off at me for having built a squash court, which to him was a waste of money that should have been used to reduce the debt. I tried to explain that the money used for that project had been specifically donated. But no: "The debt should have been, and must be, reduced, and at the forthcoming year-end meetings in Honiara I will deal with you for wasting money."

The next day another call to the radio for me to talk with him had me wondering, but not for long. This time it was to tell me that the General Conference president from America was visiting Honiara and had specially requested to visit with us at Atoifi. He would be flying in on the following day. He went on to say that he would be accompanying our visitor.

"You will have the cheque with you."

"No way, you know my position on that, and that's final."

"No cheque, then the airstrip is closed to all incoming planes."

"You wouldn't dare do such a thing."

"The instructions are now being given for the trailer to be taken and left on the runway. No cheque, no landing!"

Next morning, yet another call saying, "We are about to leave for Atoifi now."

"Have you got the cheque?"

"Yes, I have it with me and I'll give it to you as soon as we arrive."

No sooner had the plane landed and taxied to a halt than the treasurer was out and handing me the cheque.

Even presidents visiting Atoifi must ride in the trailer or walk up through the mud. We reached the hospital, and an hour or so was spent showing them around. The usual high humidity was having an effect on both men, leaving them in a lather of perspiration, so they were invited to our house where beautiful cold fresh-squeezed pineapple juice awaited them. How they enjoyed that! Earlier on, when visiting in my office, the president had described the view as being a million-dollar view, which it truly was. One could look over Uru harbour, out to sea and right up the coast. Yes, it was a million-dollar view. But now, his descriptive adjectives turned to praise for this pineapple juice; he felt he had never tasted the like before.

Assembling outside the house ready to board the trailer to return to the airstrip, he remarked, "That building there. I haven't been in there. What is it?" They had not been taken there purposely, as already I was in trouble over it and did not want to cause any further trouble in front of the president.

"Come and have a look," I said, leading the way and thinking *What is there to lose?* since he had asked about it. Once inside and having switched on the lights, it was with trepidation I waited for the reaction.

The president exclaimed, "It's a squash court! What a wonderful idea to have one out here. Oh, how many enjoyable hours have I spent on one of these. My congratulations to you for your farsightedness in building this. How long has it been here?"

"Only three months. The staff use it regularly, and it is also used for other indoor recreation, so it gets plenty of use."

Not a word of comment came from the treasurer, and then they were on their way. Of course, I would still have to wait and see what was going to happen about the squash court at the year-end meetings.

It went like this. My report of the happenings of the year was given, including the progress made in facilities, being careful not to mention the squash court. For his part, the treasurer was quick to pick up on this point. "Ira, haven't you missed something—the

squash court? What a wonderful contribution to the Atoifi campus. It has been funded by gift money, so I move we approve this project.” You could have knocked me down with a feather. Who changed his mind?

Each year the Union Mission would make appropriations to its institutions to help fund their running costs. At the end of my first year, Atoifi came out with a surplus in its budget. This was something unheard of, so much so, that the accountant was heard to remark, “What do you do with a surplus? I’ve never seen one of these!”

Now, with a new budget in place, it was time to make the first repayment off the frozen debt. All the allocation money was returned, leaving a debt of only \$70,700, and the hospital would work on being self-funding for the next year.

* * *

Beware! Just when things seem to be going along nicely, and you are feeling great at how everything is falling into place, the unthinkable happens.

Catching up with some letter writing at my desk on Monday morning, the time being twenty nine minutes past eight, rumblings and a roar heralded an earthquake. The floor shaking, the ceiling fan cutting into the ceiling on either side of it, along with the drawers of the filing cabinet flying open all at once alerted me to the fact that it was dangerous to stay there.

Betty, my secretary, was by this time running down the hallway shouting, “Earthquake, earthquake, get out of the building!” Dodging drawers and picking my way through the debris scattered on the floor, I was relieved to get to the doorway and look out along the hall to the downstairs door. There was the electric light pole, which could be seen first from one side of the doorway and the next second from the opposite side. What to do next? Being barely able to stay on my feet, I spent the rest of the thirty-four seconds it

lasted just holding on. Then it was over but would be followed over the next few hours and days by many more aftershocks. It was now time to survey the damage done by this quake, registering 7.2 on the Richter Scale.

The nearest report came in from the pharmacy located on the ground floor. "Come and have a look." What a mess! Free-standing shelves had been totally emptied, with their contents scattered everywhere. Building reports were by now coming in, but fortunately only one house was rendered uninhabitable.

An eyewitness account of the underground tank previously mentioned told of the six-inch solid concrete lid being lifted about a foot above the tank by the force of the water inside and returning to within an inch of its correct position.

Myra told also of her own experience in our high-set house. Noticing the fridge starting to topple, she moved to try to keep it upright, but on seeing everything else starting to fall off shelves, she then just grabbed for a beautifully carved wooden fish, forgetting all else as she raced outside in response to the cries of "Get out! Get out!"

An interesting sideline to this calamity was that just a month before, a geologist had been taking measurements in relation to sea levels; on his return two weeks later the water levels were about thirty centimetres higher.

If we had been thinking before that there was little to do, we quickly changed our minds. The operating theatre was the first to be repaired, as the cracks in the wall were large enough to completely see in from the outside. New medicines had to be obtained, not an easy task in such isolation. Fortunately, most of the damage was covered by insurance, but still one had to fill in numerous forms.

In addition to the repairs, a new project had to be commenced. I had been aware of this requirement when accepting the appointment. This was the building of a memorial church in memory of Lens Larwood, who had tragically been killed in a tractor accident after having given fourteen years of service as manager of the hospital.

Monies were already available, having been raised by former class- and workmates from the Sydney Adventist Hospital.

To make the concrete blocks, sand was needed, and this had to be harvested from the sea at low tide, brought back in canoes, and loaded onto the ever-faithful trailer to be delivered to the building site. It then had to be left in the rain for some six months to allow the salt to be washed out of it. The next problem was to gauge when the rainfall would be the least, thus allowing the new concrete to set. It took another two years before this church was officially opened, due to more than building problems causing delays.

* * *

To assist with producing income, approval had been given to trial a tourist enterprise. The brochure read, "Come and See the Mission Field as It Is." The first advertisement in *The Record*, a weekly church magazine, brought immediate results. Our first guests were a husband, wife, and two school-age children from Ballina in New South Wales, Australia. The programme commenced with Solair flying them in from Brisbane to Honiara. Barbara, our hostess in Honiara, would meet and greet and care for them, arranging meals for them with as many families as possible on the campus there. She would then take them to visit the sights of Honiara, including the War Memorial and Betikama Secondary School.

Next was the flight to Atoifi, where they were housed in guest rooms and invited to dine with a different family each day. Some of the national workers also participated in this, thus giving the visitors an insight to their culture as well.

Tours of the hospital and all activities were arranged, with the visitors even going to the weekly clinics by canoe and the surrounding island communities. This first exercise was a great success, and this family thoroughly enjoyed it, as did all those who followed. Everyone went home feeling that they had really seen life in the islands, and many of them made further contributions above the cost of the trip.

All those in Honiara and at Atoifi who took part in the care of the visitors were recompensed for their expenses. A week later it was back to Honiara to be met again by Barbara for their return flight to Brisbane, Australia.

It was not difficult to promote our cause on their return home, as they had learnt of the day-to-day problems and the need for those incidentals required to keep things going each day. It had never been hard to have people donate an item such as an outboard motor, but where was the money for the fuel to come from? Over the years in which this programme ran, not once did we fall short of obtaining the tourist budget. Again, I wish to thank all those who shared with us and were made richer by the experience.

Our oldest tourist was a lady well over eighty years, who insisted on doing and seeing everything that was going. She was delightful to have come and had no intention of missing out on any of the activities.

Tribute must be paid to those who went before. In the early days the only way to reach the hospital was by ship. Only twice did I ever have to do that, and you'll read about that later in this book. It took nineteen hours in an ordinary coastal ship from Honiara direct and sixteen hours on board HMAS *Flinders*.

A student missionary nurse, who came to work for a while previously, had seen the isolation and the difficulties in getting in and out of Atoifi. She returned home and started to raise funds to put in an airstrip. Land was purchased on the southern boundary of the property, swamp-land just a couple of feet above sea level, with a high mountain at the southern end. What a blessing the airstrip has proven to be over the ensuing years. Thanks so much, Dawn.

* * *

Hospital board meetings, just as in all institutions, brought out the feelings that one department's needs were greater than the others. Within our budget constraints, it was necessary for the wisdom

of Solomon to be exercised when dividing the financial pie. Most times, the department heads saw sense and were very helpful to the executive officer, me.

It was, however, necessary to see dissensions left behind us as we left the meetings. My theory was "Say what you want to inside, but that's where it ends!" Part of the time allotted for the board meeting was an extra four to six hours, weather permitting, for all to go fishing. On the occasions this was not suitable, we met at the squash court. This was the way to forget the past hours as we all had to live together on the same campus.

* * *

It would have made for a happier existence if the local people whom we served had had similar feelings towards one another. If ever anything was going to go wrong, Friday afternoons seemed to be that time. It was no exception this particular Friday. Already at the wharf preparing to take a patient back to his village, I noticed a canoe that had come in from one of our southern clinics. I went over to greet the driver. "What brings you here Billy?"

"Fighting has broken out down at Olomburi. I've a patient here who copped an uppercut with a bush knife." With that, he slightly lifted the nose of his patient, and it was obvious that his nose had been almost completely severed, and one eye was a mess.

"Where are you going?" he asked.

"I'm off to Kwai, why do you ask?"

"Will you continue on to Atorie and go to the police station to let them know of the fighting that has broken out down there? When I left, there were at least four who had been killed, and most likely a few more by the time I return. A number were running around with arrows in them, so they'll need care too. I'll stay here with my patient to see how he comes through the surgery."

Having delivered my patient and notified the police, I returned to the hospital. The patient from Olomburi was now in recovery after

surgery. Ah! Peace at last; it was just on sunset, and I was planning on making my way to the chapel for Vespers when a Kwaio nurse then called me aside saying, "Do you see those men standing about fifty metres away from the hospital? They are from Olomburi and have come to see if the patient we operated on is dead or alive. If he is alive, they have come to finish him off. Can he be put in the single bed ward?"

After discussion with Douglas and Brian, it was agreed to put him in the single ward. This meant that the windows would need to be boarded up and a lock put on the door for his safety. The key must not be given to any medical staff, as it would put them in danger. These were bad men, killers who would not hesitate to put a knife to a nurse's throat to get the key to enable them to get in and kill this man. Guess who was left holding the key.

A message was sent via people going in the direction of the police station asking if a guard could be sent to assist us in this situation. Each time a nurse needed to enter the ward someone had to find me to bring the key and open the lock, wait, and relock when she emerged. Not very satisfactory, but it was the best we felt we could do. Our patient was still alive next morning.

It had rained that night; our radiophones were off as usual on Friday night and Saturdays. You can imagine the surprise when about ten o'clock next morning, we heard a plane circling overhead. Hopping onto the motorbike I went to see what was happening, who was coming in and furthermore to see how the landing would go under the wet conditions.

The pilot had landed here before, and knew to keep his landing short in order to stay off the particularly slippery section. Just as he was almost stopping, one side of the dual wheels locked up with mud and the plane quickly slid into a 180-degree turn. It was so quick, as a matter of fact, that the opposite side wing dragged in the mud. Out stepped nine big, burly police officers. Their equipment was quickly unloaded, and the plane was up and away, appearing none the worse for its quick 180-degree turn. "Can you arrange immediate transport

for us to Olomburi?" the officer in charge asked. "A ship has been sent from Honiara with other officers to meet up with us there."

"I'll arrange for two canoes within the half hour, and we'll take you. What is it all about down there?"

"Oh, nothing new. Every now and then an event that happened about one hundred and fifty years ago is brought up, and it's on again. One of these fights break out, a few are killed, it quietens down, and everybody is happy once more. That is, until next time."

The sea was moderate, but in the open sea a two-hour canoe ride is never really enjoyable. The canoes were heavily laden; we just kept on bobbing up and down through the waves until we arrived at our destination. The ship with the other police had already arrived. Fires could be seen burning on the hillside, where the dead bodies were being cremated.

A canoe approached us; in it was Daniel, a wonderful person and the local Member of Parliament. He then related how he attempted to stop the fighting. In fact, he had been right in the middle of it, with arrows flying either side of him, as he tried to talk sense into the warring parties, but to no avail.

CHAPTER 4

It was election time throughout the provinces, and of course all were expected to take part to elect their new representatives. When the announcement was made of the date, Paramount Chief Folofo, representing the hills area south of Atoifi with his council of chiefs—the Fandanga—would not allow any elections to be held in the East Kwaio region.

Anthropologists had been busy in the area encouraging him to demand a huge sum of money from the British Government, since in 1927 a tax collector who was sent in was murdered. Retaliation was immediate with a warship shooting up a number of gardens, and now about sixty years later it was “payback time”. Either the money was to be paid now, or there would be no voting from this province.

All other provinces duly voted, and the Fandanga thought that they had gained a victory. However, the returning officer didn’t see things in the same way and insisted that everyone must be permitted to vote.

The Australian high commissioner kept me informed advising that the situation could become very dangerous for the hospital. On my way through Honiara to Kukundu in the Western Solomons, it was necessary to check with the high commissioner for any information as to whether the elections would go ahead within the next day or so. Information was that at this time no actual date had

been set, but that we needed to be aware that the situation could become serious enough to evacuate all expatriates.

At this time also, a lady was visiting from Australia, who in her younger days had worked in the Western Province as a nurse and now had joined us on one of our tourist programmes. My wife and Hazel joined me in Honiara, and we flew to Gizo and Kukundu. The only way then to communicate would be by radio, at the allotted hours of 8:00–8:05 a.m. and 12:30–13:30 p.m.

“Dawson, come to the radio.”

“This is Kukundu. Go ahead, Atoifi.”

“Douglas here, Elections have been declared last night, and voting has commenced this morning; some have already been, and the Fandanga representatives there are telling them that their names are being taken, and they will be killed. Over.”

Another voice broke in. “Ira, it’s Gordon, at head office in Honiara. At the end of this sked, go to Solair’s channel.”

“Roger.” On switching to Solair’s channel, I was already being called.

“Ira, it’s the Australian high commissioner here. I have received intelligence information that all expatriates at Atoifi could be in life-threatening danger and am suggesting that you order an evacuation of all expats. We’ll stand by for two minutes while you decide.”

What do you do in such a situation? I spoke with the local people around me, who were keen to hear every word and all offering different advice; but I was the one who would have to make the final decision. As I saw it, whichever way I decided it would no doubt be wrong in hindsight. If you ordered an evacuation and no one was hurt; what did you evacuate from? If you didn’t evacuate and someone was killed, you had been told of the danger and didn’t listen.

Finally I pressed the send button. “I am ordering the evacuation of the expats.”

“We’ll have Solair fly in at four o’clock today. I’ll contact Atoifi and instruct them how to proceed to the airstrip. Over.”

"Thanks Gordon, I'll try to get back to Honiara in the morning, somehow. Out."

Arrangements were made for Solair to divert the morning Honiara flight to a small airstrip on the island of Kukundu, and I was in Honiara by ten a.m. I was, however, not prepared for the reception I got from the expats. "There are no problems at Atoifi. Why have you evacuated us?"

Soon I received a call from Atoifi, "What's the situation?"

"The Fandanga is threatening that unless the government pays them \$365,000 by today, they will come in to Atoifi and commence killing people." This quieted the expats' protest.

"Let's contact Wahroonga Australia for permission to evacuate the whole hospital, and in the meantime we'll line up a ship large enough to get the hundred and forty people out." Our request to headquarters in Wahroonga Australia was not really taken seriously until contact with them was made by the Department of Foreign Affairs, who left them in no doubt of the seriousness of our situation. At three minutes to four I received the message that all was approved.

Going immediately to the shipping company, I found the manageress sitting, waiting. She was ready to leave at four o'clock, thinking that we had decided not to take the ship. Arrangements were quickly set in motion, and the *Solomon Princess* with me on board would sail at six p.m. I wondered why the captain had told me not to tell any of the crew where we were going until we were well out at sea; however, it became obvious when, about ten miles offshore, all the crew were called to the wheelhouse and told, "We are sailing to Atoifi to evacuate the hospital."

As most of the crew were drunk, I just couldn't believe their response. "How far from shore are we? Is it close enough to swim back? The Fandanga will kill us at Atoifi."

For nineteen hours radio silence was maintained, in hopes we would reach there before the warriors, but as the ship entered Uru Harbour, I saw to my horror that we had arrived too late. They were already there and could be clearly seen through the binoculars.

Radio silence was broken as I called up the radio operator at the hospital and asked, "What's the situation?"

"We are being held hostage by about two hundred and fifty of the Fandanga warriors. There are thirty-two Solomon Island Police, but only half of them are armed."

"Please arrange for a police escort to meet me at the wharf in ten minutes."

My short prayer was "Please, Lord, give me wisdom."

As my escorts took me up towards the hospital through the lines of armed warriors, I noticed the tips of their spears were coated with wild betelnut. When this coating is used, it poisons the blood as it passes through the victim. This meant only one thing: they were here on a killing mission.

Fear arose within me when I was only escorted to a partially completed building still one hundred metres short of the relative safety of the hospital. It was here they told me to stay while they continued on to regroup with the other police. I was now deserted, twenty metres from the school of nursing and some fifty metres from the safety of my house, with about fifty of these warriors standing nearby and not a friendly face among them.

Looking up to the hospital, I noticed a man walking down towards me, and as he came closer, I recognized him to be the chaplain. As he drew near, I quietly said to him, "Alphaeus, it's not good for you to be here, it's very dangerous."

"Ira, it's not good for you to die alone. I've come to die with you," he answered.

"Is there a 'swear' out?"

"Yes." Now I realized what this meant: by coming to rescue the hospital staff, I had walked into a trap.

My mind went into overdrive as I asked, "Where are the doctor and the paramount chief?"

"They are in the school of nursing building along with the police chief. The Fandanga wants to kill five people today, but now to kill you will be easier." To lift a swear, many pigs must be given or five

nationals killed—or better still, one white man. *So once in my life I've become valuable.*

“Alphaeus, go to the door, and get Douglas to come out. Do not let any of them know that I have arrived.” All the while I was hoping the warriors would not kill me without the express command of their chief.

“How did you get here?” Douglas asked.

“I’ve brought the rustbucket ship, the *Solomon Princess*, to take you all out. I just hope that it won’t sink when we all get on board.”

“How are you planning to do that with all these warriors here?”

No one had ever taught me what to do in such a case as this, so thinking on my feet, I replied, “Alphaeus, when we finish here, I want you to go and ask my escort to come back and return me to the ship.

“Douglas, you return to the discussion room, but do not tell anyone for fifteen minutes that I am here. Then you will inform the chief that I have come with a ship and am taking all the staff away. Be very sure to impress on him that if anyone gets sick and dies after the doctor and nurses have gone, then he will bear the whole responsibility of it, and this will mean that the families of the dead people will hold him responsible, and they will demand payback from him; this will come with the spilling of blood, and it will be the blood of his family. Insist that he and all his warriors must withdraw immediately and never again invade our hospital, threatening to kill us whenever they have a dispute with the government or anyone else.

“Douglas, Alphaeus, let’s give this our best shot. Just hope and pray that it won’t end in a bloodbath.”

In double-quick time the two police were with me, escorting me back to the ship. “Remember: we have only agreed to stay one hour,” reminded the captain, “and where are all the people?”

I picked up the radio and called up to the hospital. “Please ask the police to escort the first group of students down to the ship.”

Immediately Honiara broke in: "The Prime Minister has taken over responsibility for the international students, and they must be the first to be evacuated."

Ordering a rearrangement of students, I was relieved a few minutes later to see the police escorting the first group down past the warriors. By now, Douglas thought it should be time to see if our plan was really going to work and opened the wooden louvres to allow everyone in there to see what was happening.

"Now then, look out here at these students who are being escorted down to the wharf, where Dawson has a ship waiting to take us all away. Listen well! When we have all left and someone gets sick and dies, you will be to blame; compensation will be demanded of you, and it will be your blood paying for it."

Never before had the chief experienced anything like this. His word had always been law, and never had there been a way of escape from his murderous injustices. His tone completely changed, as he realized how things were not going his way, so very quickly he agreed to the conditions imposed on him and his warriors.

These were that the warriors were to leave and never again use the hospital as a bargaining tool. They were never to enter the property wearing their uniform and must not kill anyone from Atoifi.

Surprisingly he agreed. However, he made one condition of his own. This was that I was to stay and not return to Honiara with the ship, thus indicating that all of the expatriate workers would also return. Just imagine my relief when a message was sent to inform me that our conditions had been accepted; and I was escorted up to the hospital.

What a welcome I received from the staff; but now I had to contact Honiara and the Australian high commissioner to relay all that had occurred and asking what I should now do after having been instructed to evacuate. "Please, someone tell me what I should do."

The high commissioner was most helpful. "It's your call, You are the man on the spot, and it's up to you."

On looking down from my office I could see the chief and his men talking and sensed that it was not a happy gathering; but I was too occupied on working through where we would go from here to really pay the attention the scene deserved. The ship had to be allowed to leave, and as many of our staff and students were so obviously traumatised by the events of the past few hours, the doctor recommended that we send the most affected ones out with the ship.

So the *Solomon Princess* sailed away, much to the relief of the crew, with thirty-four persons on board. The warriors eventually dispersed, and hours later I finally was able to enter our house. "Oh, bed! How sweet you are!"

On Saturday morning the chief of police came and requested that he and his men be allowed to return to their bases, as he felt that all was well, and no more trouble was expected due to the agreements now in place. Myra still had to wait until Sunday morning to know if I was alive, as the last she had heard was Gordon telling me not to leave the ship. She knew that I had already left it and was commencing the ordeal of walking up past the armed men, when transmission to her area was cut.

Whilst eating my evening meal on Sunday after another quiet day, I was urgently called outside, where, after my eyes became accustomed to the dull light, to my horror, I could see that the doctor and a local nurse were engaged in conversation with two of the Fandanga warriors dressed in uniform!

They had walked right through the hospital and now were definitely letting it be known that half of the men had not agreed with the decision of the paramount chief to withdraw peacefully and without blood being shed, so now that the police had left, they were going to bring others with them to carry out the unfinished plan of last Friday.

Eventually the local Kwaio nurse persuaded them to leave but not before shockwaves were felt throughout the hospital. In an endeavour to calm the situation, all off-duty staff were called into the lounge room of the girls' dormitory. The room was overcrowded

as all squeezed in, and we tried to work out our strategy to maximize protection for all. In our anxiety and fear, we had not noticed that three male students were absent until they too burst into the room, one carrying a tomahawk, one a large bush knife, and one a dagger.

The huge Tongan lad carrying the dagger, and obviously very distressed yelled, "We have been searching for those two men, we wanted to kill them but couldn't find them. Shame on us, so now I am going to kill myself," and with that he stabbed himself in front of everyone!

With the room so packed he was unable to get the dagger right in tight and with his left arm right by his side he stabbed his arm directly in line with his heart. Screams of horror were all that could be heard as the doctor took him out to the theatre. "How much more do we have to take?" they cried. "We've had enough. Please get us away before we are all killed."

On the return of the doctor with the student, who had been stitched up, it was decided that those most at risk to us would have to be taken out that night. But how?

Now it was necessary to evacuate four people in the dark, seventeen kilometres by canoe out into the open sea, and back in behind the reef to where the road commenced. Then after another four kilometres running to the police station, I awakened the officer who, on hearing my request to come and help us, replied, "No way. They will kill me on my own. I have to stay here."

Leaving the group at a house there to await transport across the island, I returned to be met by a deputation saying that if we survived the night, would I please get everybody out, as certain death was next.

At daylight with no ship, the evacuation of one hundred and thirteen people commenced by using only two, twenty-three foot fibreglass canoes to Atouri, from where I would need to arrange road transport across the island and a ship to Honiara. With only six people in each canoe, it became very clear by two o'clock that afternoon that we were not all going to make it to safety that day.

There would be about twenty-four still to go, and the warriors would be back at night for sure. Having tried all day to get a ship, to no avail, I was standing on top of the hill completely discouraged, complaining to myself for having a ship and agreeing to their peace.

Then I turned to overlooking the wharf when something caught my attention; I thought I was seeing things as a launch entered the harbour. No, this really was a launch, in fact a launch whose skipper had borrowed a two-hundred-litre drum of diesel, which had never been replaced or paid for, ultimately being barred from coming into our wharf. Now, it was me racing down the steps and along to the wharf to meet him as he pulled alongside. He met me saying, "No, Dawson, I don't have any money for you."

Interrupting him, I asked, "How would you like to have your debt wiped out? Just take these people to Atouri, and your debt is wiped." Of course he readily agreed, and then I asked why he had come today. His answer was unexpected. "I don't know, but about ten o'clock this morning I was directed by my thoughts to get in my boat at Olumburi and come to Atoifi." How relieved we all were, as this meant no one would be left for another day. I would follow in my tinny, but first of all I had to go to the hospital radio and put out a final message, being unaware that Myra was at that self-same minute in Solair's office in Gizo hearing, for her, the heart-stopping words, as I transmitted, "This is Atoifi closing down," and then, "Signing off. Atoifi out."

The day after our arrival with the evacuated group, Gordon, who had been caring for the Honiara end of things, and I had had a debriefing session with the newly elected prime minister and some cabinet ministers, when we were assured that he would do all in his power to overcome our problems. Now, two weeks later, we were again called to meet with the Prime Minister, when we would learn what he had been able to accomplish on our behalf. He obviously was a man of his word, which would again be proven in the months to follow.

His opening words to us were “I have had the paramount chief over here in Honiara, and the government has sorted out the matters which caused your problems. As this really had nothing to do with Atoifi, I have his promise that never again will the hospital be held hostage as a bargaining tool should they ever have another dispute with the government.

“Ira, I am asking you if you would be prepared to lead your hospital workers back to Atoifi. If you agree, I’ll make arrangements for you to first go back and check everything out and bring the workers back a few days later. Everything is arranged for some military officers to be there, so you will not be alone on your return. You have my solemn promise to protect you and your staff if there is ever any threat against you. Please go back.”

After a brief meeting with the men in Honiara, it was agreed that I would return on a special flight on the Sunday morning. Because word had come to the prime minister that our airstrip had possibly been damaged, it was arranged that the return would be via Auki, then overland to Atouri, from where I would return in my boat back to Atoifi—the reverse of the day of the evacuation.

Sunday morning dawned with light rain and low heavy clouds. Yes, the flight would be on, so I made my way to Henderson Airport. Eight other passengers would be accompanying me to Auki including the minister of health, Alfred Maitea, a former chaplain of Atoifi. A vehicle from the local sawmill had been arranged to ferry us across to Atouri.

Our pilot, Bill, was the same one who had volunteered to fly the expats out at the beginning of this trouble, and as usual he invited me to sit up front with him. Shortly after takeoff he advised us that due to the low cloud it would not be possible to fly any higher than just below the clouds. With hills over two thousand feet near our destination, along with nothing for an instrument landing, it would be necessary to stay below these clouds. The flight would be mostly over the ocean, with only the Florida Islands between us and our destination.

Flying at five hundred feet we could clearly see the passengers on ships as we flew over them, but as we approached the Florida Islands, the clouds appeared to be getting much heavier. In fact, some areas in front of us looked menacing as the sky became black, from the clouds to the sea. The pilot pointed to some of these, remarking, "The rain in those dark places would be heavy enough to bring us down, so we had better choose our passage with care." As all direct passages seemed to have no place to safely pass through, he turned south to follow the island chain, looking for a break in the clouds that would offer us the safe passage we sought.

Later, on descending to three hundred feet he had set the plane onto autopilot, thus allowing him to concentrate on looking for the break we so badly needed. "There it is! This looks like the spot we should go through. Tighten your seat belts and hang on; it may be a little rough."

He turned the plane in the direction of Auki. This was the break he had been looking for, and our position was now at the southern end of the islands, and not too far off course. No sooner had he altered the course and covered but a short distance, when it seemed that someone had pulled a screen of clouds over the passage. It was there no more, and just in front of us rain absolutely poured down from the black clouds.

Quickly summing up our situation, he said, "No go!" and turned the plane once again, this time to go back north over the Floridas. Now we were confronted by another problem; there were hills in front of us just a few hundred feet higher than our altitude. "Not a great problem," the pilot said as he pushed the two throttles forward, the engines responding with a roar, at the same time pulling back on the control wheel to lift us up and over the hills. But nothing happened. The other passengers could now see what we two were seeing in front of us, nothing but a hill! We were too close, and the last I remembered seeing was the water hanging on the leaves of the trees in front of us.

Pandemonium, screams went up from everyone in the plane, and darkness enveloped us. Had we crashed? No! Rain was pelting onto the windscreen, and passengers were still screaming. What had happened? The altimeter was showing that we were now flying at eighteen hundred feet. It was unbelievable!

Everything appeared confused, with the noise of the rain beating down onto the metal of the plane and blurring the windshield along with the darkness of the clouds. Turning to me, the pilot shook his head and said, "How did we get here? The autopilot did not release. We'll have to return to Honiara, as we are now too high to come down at Auki."

With clouds all around us, I looked through my window on the right hand side of the plane and to my amazement saw the sea below us. "I can see the sea below us, Bill."

Sitting less than four feet from me, he then looked out of his window saying, "You're joking! I see nothing but clouds."

"No, I can see the sea and I can tell you which way the wind is blowing the waves."

"Can you see any land or hills?"

"No, nothing but sea."

Slowly he brought the plane down to be once again below the clouds, and a short time later we touched down at Auki. On pulling the plane to a halt at the end of the runway, he turned to me and said, "I don't believe in God, but after today and what just happened up there, I'll fly you anywhere you ever need to fly." That plane never got back to Honiara until the next day, having to overnight up in the Russell Islands due to lack of visibility in Honiara.

Our transport awaited us, and soon we were bumping across the forty kilometres to Atouri where the aluminium boat and outboard motor awaited my return, and soon I was headed on the final leg of the return to Atoifi.

As the boat approached the wharf, two uniformed men were coming down to meet me. These were members of the Solomon Island military who had been sent to guard me and had been warned

by their commander that if anything went wrong, they would be punished even with their lives.

I left my suitcase at our front door and went straight up to the hydro to restore power to the compound. This meant a two-kilometre walk to where the water source entered the system. As drizzling rain was falling, the track up the mountain began to get very slippery. After an hour's work the water was flowing again down the pipe, and electricity was restored once more.

The two soldiers accompanied me everywhere even up and back down the mountain. On the way down, they had positioned themselves one in front and the other behind. By now the track was very slippery, and the man behind lost his footing. As he slipped forward, one of his legs went between my legs, causing me to fall. I had barely hit the ground before the two of them had me back on my feet, saying, "You're not hurt—you're not hurt, are you?" They told me how they had been warned not to allow anything to happen to me. I assured them that all was well, I was definitely not hurt, and they had nothing to worry about. We continued slipping and sliding down the hill together. Finally, as night approached, it was back to our house very, very exhausted.

It was then that good sense was not shown. Automatically going to the refrigerator, which by now was cool, and taking out some food, I prepared it for tea. What a stupid mistake, poisoning myself and within the hour becoming ill. Would this night never end?

A new day dawned sunny and bright, and so did I. It was now time to check the airstrip over and prepare it for landing, as the first load of returning staff were due in next day. There were a few easily spotted wooden stakes in the middle of the runway which someone had placed there to prevent any planes from landing. These were quickly removed, but the grass was long and would have to be mown before a plane could be allowed to come in.

Much of the day was spent mowing with the slasher behind the tractor. This was a long but easy job. It was almost finished, needing just one final run down the middle of the runway, when to

my dismay one remaining stake that had been missed earlier pierced the front tyre. With the air and water rushing from the puncture, it was up towards the workshop as quickly as possible, but as it was a four-wheel-drive tractor with a nearly flat front tyre, it was only able to reach the base of the last hill up to the hospital.

From here the wheel would have to be taken off and then up to the workshop. There was not a tool to be found; all were missing. Only a few bits and pieces were there of any use in changing a tyre. By using a log, a pole, and my two police friends, eventually the wheel was jacked up. More improvisation was needed to get the wheel nuts off and then push the heavy wheel up to the workshop.

This was the first time the tyre had ever been off the rim, and it did not want to come off easily. But after much huffing and puffing, it eventually yielded and came away from the rim. Next it was necessary to find something to mend the hole with, perhaps a tube repair unit which had previously been used for the motorbike. It worked, and that job was done.

As the wheel was being put back together, a strange sensation was occurring in my fingers, which seemed to be cramping up. Finally the wheel was on and the tractor back in the shed, ready for transporting the staff from the airstrip to the hospital tomorrow, and I walked oh so wearily back down to the house.

By now, the pain in the fingers of both hands was unbearable as they cramped up. Then to make matters worse, the toes decided to get into the act. My toes were really turned up by this stage. Then the legs joined in, and the muscles cramped also. What indescribable pain! What was happening to me?

Nothing like this had ever happened in my life. Here I was, at a hospital, but no one was there who could help me.

A hot bath was tried, but that only made things worse, and to get out of the tub put the whole body through the most agonising pain. The thought went through my mind, *I'm not going to be here tomorrow. And after all that I've been through these last weeks, now I'll*

die before the hospital reopens. Last night, it was food poisoning, and now tonight my toes are turning up with these cramps.

My prayer that night was that I would not die there alone. Somehow, nature allowed me to drift off eventually, but whether I was unconscious or just asleep, I'll never know.

I greeted a new day by feeling no effects of the previous night. On time the plane arrived, and I would go out on it. As the nursing staff got off the plane, I thought it wise to tell them what had happened to me the night before. On-the-spot diagnosis! "It was tetany, and all you had to do was breathe into a plastic or brown paper bag and breathe it back in!" So simple when you know how.

The reason for my going out on that plane was that the last few weeks had taken their toll. Myra had reported to the medical staff that each night I had been waking her up screaming. So it had been decided by my superiors that we should return to Australia for three weeks' recuperation. One thing was certain: to speak of these events would need time before they would all be told. In fact, it would take two years before anyone would know what you have just read here.

CHAPTER 5

After three weeks recuperating in Australia, it was back to Atoifi and get on with the job of having the hospital running as efficiently as possible. There were some new staff members along with some staff shortages. The position of the director of the school of nursing had not been filled, and no one seemed interested in taking the job, especially in the light of the experience the hospital had just been through.

An interesting event had occurred during our absence. The Paramount Chief had taken ill—very ill, in fact—with a complaint that caused him much pain. After suffering as long as possible, he allowed his helpers to bring him to the hospital for treatment. It was just too much against his culture to allow himself to be put into a hospital ward bed, so a bed had to be placed on a veranda and curtained off around him. He was well treated and was able to leave a few days later. After this episode, many local people enjoyed reminding him that his life had been saved by the very place he had held hostage a few weeks earlier.

A request had been made for the hospital to consider the possibility of establishing a clinic up in the first hill south of Atoifi, at a small village on a walking track between us and Sinarango. The president of our mission and I were to be escorted by a landowner of that region to examine the viability of such a suggestion.

The day arrived; the going was tough as we went straight into the two-thousand-foot climb. A beautiful view, but how we had worked to get up there. In order to reach the designated area, it was necessary to pass through some smaller villages. One in particular had a path leading away from the main track for those not going through the village. As we approached, our guide said that they who lived there were not very friendly people and that we should go so quietly that they wouldn't even know we passed by. We believed him and obeyed without question, for I had long since learned from previous experience that when one saw a Solomon Islander turn deathly white, he was very ill or very scared. I knew that at that moment it was the latter.

Later that day we met and held discussions with a friendly chief. All was going well until my boss, who like me was feeling very footsore, thought it would take the weight off his feet if he were to sit down a little. A fence of sorts was the answer, he thought.

The horrified look on the guide's face and an explanation that it was just wouldn't do for him to be seated higher than the chief soon put paid to that idea, and no sitting down was allowed.

Later my boss, a keen photographer, noticed a small hut and thought to take a closer look and get a photo would be lovely. Once again, the guide had to divert him from this, as it was the birthing and monthly hut for the village women. A step or two further and he would have been declared "unclean" and thus would not have been allowed back on any of the normal walking tracks that day.

Our day concluded by us sliding down the hill on our rear ends and arriving back at the hospital looking very bedraggled. No, there would be no clinic up in that area.

Due to the evacuation, the Lens Larwood Memorial Church, which had been scheduled to be officially opened in December, was not completed in time. It was by this building under construction that I had been left by my police escort. It was now time to get on with this, and we hoped for its opening at Easter. With assistance

from a group of volunteers from Australia, the earthquake damage was attended to, and the church building was finished.

Plans for the programme of the official opening were put in place. Lens Larwood's family and friends, along with many others who had worked with him, arrived from Australia. Church officers from Honiara and many former local workers also were invited. This made a busy schedule for the operators of the Western Pacific Airline, who were most helpful in running a continuous service ferrying passengers from Henderson Airport to Atoifi. All went well, with only a group of four passengers left to fly in.

Suddenly, the clouds rolled in, and the plane had to remain on our airstrip. Word was sent back that weather permitting, a special trip tomorrow, Saturday morning, would pick up the remaining passengers at Henderson. There being a spare seat, Gary suggested I join him for the flight next morning, which I gladly accepted. We found our passengers waiting for us, and a few minutes later we were ready for takeoff.

Taxiing down the runway, the pilot notified the tower that we were ready for takeoff and received the go-ahead. Henderson airport is quite long, and at the river end there is a slight dip, so it is not possible to see the other end of the runway—nor, for that matter, even the middle from the cabin of a small plane.

The plane quickly gathered speed, and as we came over the top of the slight rise, we were horrified to see that a Solair plane had just pulled out onto the runway and was straight ahead of us at a right angle to our takeoff path.

We really needed more distance to gain more speed to get up. It was a matter of trying and seeing what would happen as our pilot pulled back and got the plane to lift off sufficiently to clear the tail of the other plane.

A few words were exchanged between the pilots, which I heard on my headphones. The other pilot's reasoning was "You don't fly on Saturday, and I knew no other planes were about. What are you doing here?"

The opening ceremony went off very well, with only the passengers of that flight knowing of the potential problem we had encountered.

* * *

An unseasonable cyclone building up near Ontongjava was the main item of the Solomon Islands News broadcast. This being well to the north of Malaita and usually too far north for cyclones, little attention was given to it at Atoifi.

On Sunday morning a strange sight was noticed outside our house. There, perched on an electric light pole was a frigate bird; most unusual, as these are usually only seen well out to sea. The locals said that there must be bad weather about for this bird to come to rest on land. This changed everything, and thorough attention was paid to the weather forecasts of that day.

The five o'clock report from the meteorology bureau in Fiji came in, that a cyclone named Namu with very strong winds was approximately 250 kilometres east of Malaita, heading south, and would most likely hit Mackira Island later that night. We mentioned to each other how sorry we were for those people right in the path of it.

"I'll go and just make sure everything here is secure, in case we get some effects of it."

"Why worry?" was Myra's remark to that, "It's hundreds of kilometres from us."

The second video of *Ghandi* was scheduled to be shown that night at seven thirty and would run for two hours. During this viewing it was noted that a heavy wind was blowing up, after what had been a perfectly calm day. Within a few minutes heavy rain was falling along with violent winds. By the end of the film the wind and rain were so strong that everyone waited under the veranda before attempting to move to their homes. The rain could be seen through the streetlights blowing almost horizontal to the ground.

One of the student nurses, a large Tongan girl, decided to brave the elements and make the fifty-metre dash to her residence, but she was literally blown off her feet. Picking herself up and being blown over again, she eventually reached the dormitory just as the front of the roof was blown off. *No!* Cyclone Namu was not 250 kilometres to the east. It was right here!

Being stranded at the hospital, some of the folk were bedded down for the night wherever possible. Sitting on the veranda was where we could see the storm at its most destructive. Although the hydro had cut out, the emergency diesel kept lights going all through the night. However, power was cut off in some sections of the hospital, most notably the operating theatre.

While all the drama of the elements had been going on outside, another drama was unfolding within. A caesarean birth was imminent, and to provide the necessary power, leads had to be run across the road from the generating shed, allowing for a little mite named Namu to be born.

Towards daylight the iron roof on the hospital began to feel the fury of Namu as it was being forced loose. Would it survive until morning? We certainly hoped so.

Morning finally dawned, and what a scene met our eyes! We truly knew the meaning of the expression, "It looks like a cyclone hit it." Destruction was on every hand: power poles down, huge trees uprooted, wooden louvres blown open, and rooms filled with water. Coconuts like cannonballs had shot through the walls of the squash court, allowing the wind to lift the roof with beams that had taken ten men to lift, hurling it about like matchsticks onto the house on the opposite side of the road and completely demolishing it also.

Surrounded by all the devastation, everyone on our campus was thankful to have survived. Of course, each had a story to tell of their experience that night.

"Where to start? First we must get ourselves functional. Who knows how the villagers around have fared, and if we are not up and running, we will not be able to assist them."

Electricity restoration became the number-one priority, with poles straightened and cables re-tensioned to the best of our ability. The hydro was next, clearing out the logs and sand from its source.

While some worked around the hospital, others were sent out to check up on the neighbours. What a day! By nightfall power had been restored from the hydro, the roof replaced on the girls' dormitory, and fallen trees sawn up and removed.

The reports coming in from the villages were not good. Many had suffered complete loss of houses due to the huge waves bringing in floating logs and breaking well onto the land. Gardens were completely destroyed. This meant real problems all around for them and us. Trees on the hills had lost every bit of foliage and bark, as well as many of them being completely flattened. Destruction and despair were all around us. Our airstrip had been covered by a metre-and-a-half waves, which had left a hundred-millimetre deposit of silt needing to be cleared before any plane could land. Our communications tower was gone, leaving us with no contact with the outside world.

Next morning a special all staff meeting was called and the position laid before everyone. "We are now functional except for outside communication and the airstrip. It is believed that there are many villagers in pretty bad shape, with some injured and perhaps others dead. A call was made for volunteers to go out and bring back reports on the situations, which we will then reassess." Many volunteered, being thrilled to assist with the work.

Reports that evening showed a grim situation. At least one complete village had slid into the river with perhaps thirty or more people dead or missing. Other villages had lost all gardens, and these were only the nearest villages, as the sea was too clogged with debris for others to be reached at this time.

Finally, after three days, contact was made with the outside world, and our plight became known. The pilot was informed that we had one thousand feet of cleared landing strip available, but although he was willing to try it, Civil Aviation demanded we

prepare an extra two hundred feet. This was done, and the brave pilot landed the Aztec, slippery but successfully, just on dusk.

By now we were getting a clearer picture of the immediate needs. Up to ten thousand people were homeless with their gardens completely destroyed. The airstrip was going to be our only possible way to assist by bringing supplies in.

Much of Guadalcanal had been hit by the cyclone and even the west coast of Malaita. The destruction was such that international attention was drawn to the plight of the Solomons. Australia sent in Hercules aircraft with supplies, followed by HMAS *Stalwart* along with other smaller vessels to assist in the relief work.

Meanwhile the Aztec was flying in a half tonne of supplies four and five times a day. Canoes were coming in reporting damage as far south as Little Malaita and asking for assistance. We now understood that it was necessary to try to assist twelve thousand homeless people. As there were no leaves available for roof thatching, black plastic sheeting for this purpose was flown in along with rice, but there never seemed to be enough to satisfy the demand.

Students and staff worked tirelessly with no thought for themselves. As soon as hospital work was finished, they lined up to assist in unloading the planes and preparing supplies for distribution. It was heart-rending to be giving only a bag of rice, knowing full well that four were needed. But without favouritism it was fairly distributed to all who sought help.

By Friday evening everything possible had been done, and we even had a few bags in stock. At this time we had problems getting supplies from Honiara and had been informed that there would be no more until at least Sunday midday.

Having bathed and feeling relaxed for the first time since Sunday, I was brought back to earth by a knock at the door. Standing there were four bushmen, only one of whom seemed vaguely familiar. Having worked for some time in Honiara before returning to live in his village again, he could speak a little pidgin.

"We have been walking since Tuesday, from hills five and six up behind Atoifi. The rain has destroyed the path, and many trees have blocked our tracks. There are many people in our area, and all our gardens and hillsides have slipped into the river, the fish are dead, and our people are hungry. Could you supply us with some food to take back to them?"

On hearing his story, I assured him that we would most certainly provide some rice. "I'll get it for you now," I told them; "rest here the night, and leave when you are ready in the morning."

"Oh, no, our Merris are coming in the morning to carry the supplies back! Could we have something for tonight, as we haven't eaten since Tuesday?" was the response.

"Of course, and I'll see you have a place to sleep."

"Who are these people, and where have they come from?" was my question to the locals, but none seemed too clear about that, until our cleaner and gardener came up with the answer.

"They are cannibals who live in isolation away back in the hills, usually having no contact outside of their area. It must be very bad if they have come down here for help."

Little did we realize then what the ultimate effect of that knock on our door would mean in the future. The women eventually arrived, slept the night, and departed next morning with four bags of rice.

After a couple of weeks, the police contacted us to see if they could be of any assistance. "You surely can," was my grateful answer. "If you supervise the distribution of rice, that would leave me free to work on getting further supplies."

Supplies were becoming harder and harder to obtain, as those in charge were not kindly disposed towards Malaitans, saying, "They wouldn't go to elections. Let them die; they are not receiving any more supplies."

As well as this problem, fuel was also becoming short, as we had been providing each canoe that came with enough fuel to cover the trip. With all coastal shipping tied up with delivering relief to

everywhere other than Malaita, it was impossible to get any fuel deliveries.

Our Aztec pilot, in collaboration with the Australian Air Force, thought to fly a Caribou out to look at our airstrip with the possibility of landing on it. Unfortunately, after that flyover, the answer was "Sorry, we are too heavy and would go through the surface, but we'll try something else for you. We'll fly over and try a fuel drop into the harbour from a low-level flight." That afternoon the harbour was cleared of all craft, and over came the plane. The first drop resulted in the drum bursting on impact, as did the second also. A good try, but unfortunately not the result hoped for.

A few days later, two Solair pilots volunteered to fly in two, two-hundred-litre drums of petrol in the cabin of a British Islander plane with success. Our thanks to you, Bill and Willakai, two brave lads with cargo that made you a flying bomb. The RAAF did return another day, dropping clothing and other supplies out of the back of their plane right on target on the airstrip which was collected by off-duty nurses and distributed to those in need.

* * *

The police did a good job in distributing supplies as they became available, this being our biggest problem. Then one day our four bushmen returned, but the police were quick to turn them away, saying, "You are not from around here, and no one lives up where you are claiming to have come from. On your way."

Dejectedly, they came to me. "Dawson, our old people are very hungry and dying. Will you not help us?" Having a small cache of rice for emergencies such as this, I yielded to their sincere request. They were quietly provided with as much as they could transport with the carriers available and were soon on their way.

The supply situation was becoming more and more desperate with each passing day, and it seemed that there was only one thing left to do. A trip to Honiara might see some improvement. However,

this idea was met with “Don’t bother coming; we are doing all we can, and you can’t do any more than what we are.”

“Thanks for that information, but I’ll be over tomorrow.”

On arrival, first stop was the disaster distribution centre to speak with the manager. He was quite unimpressed with our plight and replied, “Let those Kwaio people die; don’t worry about them.”

By now it was time to come on heavy, asking, “Where do all these relief supplies come from? From the Australian Government, and as you well know, I am an Australian, and we need forty tonnes of food today. Otherwise, I’ll have to speak to the Australian authorities and let them deal with you.”

After pondering carefully on this for a while, he replied, “OK, wise guy! I’ll give you an authorisation for forty tonnes, but let me warn you, it will be impossible for you to get a ship to take it to East Malaita, as I have all the shipping seconded to me. Here is your authorisation.”

Thinking, *Well, at least that’s a beginning*, my thoughts were now how to get it to Atoifi without a ship. Too slow, and too long a job for a small plane. *Perhaps this is a time to call for a favour*. Just a short way down the street was the Australian embassy, so it was not long before I was at the front office. “Could I please speak to the high commissioner?”

The receptionist replied, “I’m sorry, but he is busy with all the relief vessels and staff in town. Would it be possible for you to come back next week?”

“Yes, I understand that he is busy, but please would you go and tell him that Ira Dawson is here and requires his assistance?”

This she agreed to do and within a few minutes returned with the commissioner by her side. He asked, “Ira, how can I help you?”

Quickly telling him of our plight, and having authority for forty tonnes of food but no transport, I appealed to him: “Can you do anything to help us?”

“Come back in twenty minutes, and I’ll see what can be done for you.”

On arriving back, right on time, the receptionist greeted me, "I'll phone through and let him know you are here. I have instructions to take you to him; will you please follow me?"

Down into the bowels of the building we went. A knock on the door was answered by "Come in," and there before my eyes were more top brass than I'd ever seen before.

"Ira, I want you to meet Bob Willis, Captain of HMAS *Flinders*, a survey ship which has been assigned to take you and the forty tonnes of food to East Malaita today. You will travel with the vessel and see that it is unloaded as you require."

"Glad to meet you, Ira. We'll load in one hour. See you there."

I did not apologize for having a big smile on my face as the authorisation was handed in for the release of forty tonnes of food. "Where did you get a ship?" was the question.

The reply: "Oh, the Australian Navy is taking it to East Malaita."

Even though this ship was fitted with all the sophisticated instruments you could imagine on board, we had to pull into a cove that night because of the danger to it of sailing in a sea full of floating debris.

"Atoifi, Atoifi, this is HMAS *Flinders*, do you copy?"

"Yes, HMAS *Flinders*. Is that you, Ira? What are you doing on that ship?" Betty the operator asked.

"We are bringing forty tonnes of supplies to be distributed between Atoifi and Olomburi. Please notify these villages to have transport ready to receive their supplies. Time of arrival at Atoifi will be two thirty." That day went down in the history of the east coast of Malaita as "the day Dawson brought the Australian Navy to Atoifi."

While the ship was being unloaded, the captain accepted the invitation to tour our hospital and taste some delightful freshly squeezed pineapple juice. Thanks, Captain Bob Willis and men of HMAS *Flinders*, for answering our need. A job well done.

CHAPTER 6

Although the food supply problem was now in hand, our friends from the hills were still having their troubles. The police still would not accept them as having genuine needs. The statistics office had no records of anyone living up there. The day came when they had come down once more, and Martin, their spokesman, came to me asking, "Dawson, will you come and see for yourself what our problems are? No one else believes us."

I was well aware of what the locals were saying about these people, who had now become known as "Dawson's family". It was believed that they were dangerous, cannibals who would kill and eat anyone going there; and now I was being asked to go in and visit them! From all around Atoifi my workers and friends expressed their amazement that I would even be asked to do such a thing. "Don't go; they will kill you and eat you!" was their constant warning to me.

We talked it over, not able to really accept that cannibalism was still practised in this day and age. Perhaps a little naïve, but we agreed that they did need our help.

"Martin," I asked, "will you guarantee my safety, if I go with you?"

"Yes, I will do that for you. You have my word." Really, in hindsight, how dumb was it to ask a cannibal to guarantee anyone's safety?

Arrangements were made that in a week's time, a Monday morning, I would go with them. During that week I spoke again with the high commissioner, who was fascinated by the invitation and assured me that he would underwrite the cost of whatever they needed. By this time he had heard that they were some of the most primitive people left on earth and would be pleased to be a part of the experience.

The appointed day arrived; fourteen men had come to escort me. Some of my workers asked to come, as they were genuinely concerned for me; but were told very forcibly, "No saltwater men. Only Dawson." And thus we set off.

As we passed along the airstrip, a man from a nearby village asked, "Dawson, you go willingly, or are they taking you by force?"

"No, I go willingly."

Up the first hill, some two thousand feet, was hard work. In very slippery conditions, we had to clamber over fallen trees, and my breathing problems did not make it any easier. Many times during that day the wisdom or foolishness of what I was doing was a constant thought. Having arrived eventually at the top of Hill One and asking, "How far now?" I received the answer, "Close up now, Dawson." This was repeated oh, so many times during this day.

Next we walked through a swiftly flowing river, rather than take me up another hill. This proved to be extremely difficult, with the current flowing against us and the water chest high. Now the third hill had to be tackled. It was a killer, just as hard as the first, but I was wet and worn, so it seemed to be harder. "How far now?"

"Close up now, Dawson."

On top of Hill Four, it was easier to see their problems, with hillsides having completely slipped from top to bottom. We struggled down to what was left of a river to wash and drink before starting up to where we would stay the night. This hill, although about one thousand feet, was not counted amongst the main hills, but it was probably the most difficult of all.

On top of it a small hut had been constructed in which we would spend the night. However, to reach it, we had to cross over where one side of the hill had slid one way and the other the opposite way. This meant that we had to walk a razor-sharp edge holding on to each other; one slip and we would be gone to the bottom.

At last, we had reached the hut. What a relief! *Now to make myself comfortable* was the thought in my mind. With barely sufficient air in my lungs, my "Lilo" was inflated, much to the amazement of my carers. Every part of my body ached, but first it was necessary to eat to give me the strength needed for tomorrow.

Rice, which had been carried up by the Merris, was by now being cooked for my escorts. *Perhaps a couple of dry Weet Bix (a breakfast food) will suffice for me.* As I started to nibble on one, it became obvious that one of the men was watching me and was interested in what I was eating. He indicated that he wanted to try one, so it was passed to him. Taking it between finger and thumb, raising it up above eye level then with a quick flick of the wrist and the opening of the mouth the whole Weet Bix disappeared. Translation of his observation: "Numba one Good fella Kai Kai!"

Every part of my body was aching with fatigue. A little before daylight a painful ear awakened me; my left ear seemed to be on fire. Something had bitten me. The whole ear was throbbing, and the pain was becoming unbearable. I began to think it would be impossible for me to walk back to Atoifi. The whole side of my face was now being affected, with the pain moving down my arm. Somehow the time passed until daylight eventually came, and with it there was movement among my cannibal companions. When my translator came it was obvious to him that something was wrong. His knowledge of pidgin was limited, and this presented quite a problem in explaining my agony. Finally, the message was understood that something had bitten me on the ear. In fact it really felt as though it was now on fire.

"No problem, Dawson, come with me."

As I followed him for just a few metres, it became obvious that his all-knowing eyes seemed to be searching the ground for something.

“Here, now this fella plant good too much.”

With that he pulled out a knife and dug under a green leafy plant. Out came the root. A quick slash, and sap began to drip. Passing it to me he indicated that it should be rubbed on my ear, and to my amazement and utter astonishment in less than thirty seconds the entire pain and fire from my body had completely disappeared. What this plant was I still don’t know, but the effect was surely something remarkable. Now the day’s work could get under way.

On descending to the river, a man of short stature was awaiting us. Here was the chief of the whole area—Silas Nika by name—and introductions were made all round. Little was it apparent then the part we would play in each other’s lives during the next eighteen months. Silas was an extremely powerful witch doctor who, along with his council of chiefs, ruled the area with great authority.

He now took charge, talking to me through the interpreter. No one else spoke when he was speaking. All the morning and early afternoon was spent inspecting destroyed villages and landslides that had caused the gardens to slip to the river far below. There was no doubt at all that these people had real problems, there being no food left where the gardens had been. By midafternoon we found ourselves on the top of the sixth hill, which would later be known as Karfurum. A hut had been constructed there for my visit, and it was here that all 366 persons of the area would gather later in the afternoon.

After listening to their troubles, I asked, “What would you like me to do for you”?

Their response was most unexpected. “We would like some axes and knives, and because all the vegetation has gone, we need some clothes.” A period of consternation followed this, as no one seemed to know the name of what they wanted next. Finally an explanation

was made. "We have heard of a small thing, that when rubbed on the axe or the knife, they become quick to cut again."

I finally got the message that they were speaking of a file. With an understanding nod, I conveyed that their request was received. Continuing on, they asked, "If you can find it in your heart to give us some food to eat until our gardens are growing, along with cooking pots."

The most remarkable thing about their requests was that these people, who lived in small family group villages, were asking for just what was sufficient for the group and not individually as one might have expected. Now it was my understanding that the axes and knives were for making new gardens and not for war.

Assurance was given that each village would receive what they had asked for. Names and numbers of persons in each village were recorded, and not once was there any clamouring by anyone or any village group trying to push ahead of any other. Obviously they had a code of order, and everyone knew their position in it.

The business having been completed, it was now my turn to learn more about them by asking a few questions. Just then, a piccaninny (child) ventured close to me and began rubbing the back of my hand, whereupon a woman came up closer also. Noticing the dilemma on my face, the translator came quickly to my side, explaining that, as they had never seen a white person before, they thought that if they rubbed my skin hard enough, a black skin below would be revealed.

Now, back to my questions: "How do you get on for marriage?"

"That's simple. Firstly a boy's parents must pay the bride price to the girl's parents."

"With what?"

Quickly a small amount of "Custom Money" was produced to show me the answer.

"What if a boy and girl wander off on their own?" was my next question.

"If they wander off without a chaperone, the girl is then considered as 'spoilt', and his parents must pay for her."

"How is the price then set?"

"The chief must then set the price."

"What if his parents can't pay the set price?"

"No problem! The boy's parents then hand him over to the girl's parents, who kill him and eat him." (!) "Really, we don't have much of these problems."

Toilet facilities were nonexistent; and one must wait until cover of darkness to attend to one's needs. After thirty-six hours of waiting, even a pole suspended through two forked sticks over the top of a cliff was a welcome relief.

As darkness closed in, it seemed as though one could almost reach out and touch the stars, which were bright and beautiful. Just one hut was on the top of this hill, large enough to permit all the older persons to gather around a fire in the centre of it and myself to lie down on my Lilo. It was very cold up there, and most were naked, including a few who had visited Atoifi and had already received clothes. It appeared that they only wore them when coming to Atoifi.

Before retiring to my Lilo, which again drew a lot of attention, there was a lot of activity outside, with much loud talking. I asked, "What's happening? Is everything all right?"

"We are just setting up guards to make sure no enemy comes by."

Again it was a wonderful feeling to be in the horizontal position. The hut was full of smoke, and added to that was the smell coming from the pipes and bush tobacco that they all seemed to be smoking. Even the small children were passed the pipes to suck on. The reason given for this was "It takes the hunger pains away."

Lying there on an elevated bench constructed especially for me was not at all like home. Soon the talking became a little more excited inside, but the only word I plainly understood was *Dawson*. I assumed that they were possibly speaking of the events. Trying to get away from the smoke, I found it best to face away from the group. And so a long night passed, and a beautiful sunrise came over the mountaintops, giving me the feeling that today it was good to be alive. (Remember this statement.)

No evidence was visible to me of the happenings of the night, and only eighteen months later would all be revealed of what had actually happened up there in a hut so far from Atoifi.

It had taken over ten hours walking to arrive up there, but the return trip should have been rather easier with much more downhill, as the path was an unmade track and for me less energy-consuming. However, it was in some ways far more dangerous as I often found my feet slipping away and myself with a thump sitting on the muddy track.

Eventually, just a few minutes before four o'clock, we arrived back at Atoifi, and I asked, "Why are there so many people here?" as it seemed there were hundreds of them.

The reply given to me was "If you hadn't returned by four o'clock, we were all going into the hills to look for you, as we believed that they were going to kill you."

A waterbed, a real toilet, and a lovely meal with a loving wife happy to have me back made a good ending to this day. There was much to "story" about!

As a result of the cyclone most of the nearby villages had major problems; the most common being that of the water supply. Having been a plumber by trade I was now in the right trade at the right place to help in solving these problems.

A Catholic village down the harbour was my first port of call. There I found that some of the pipes bringing the water from its source had been bent and clogged. This meant the women had to carry water from the source a kilometre away. After a day spent working on the line, water was once more flowing, much to the delight of the women and appreciation from the expatriate parish priest. Similar problems were encountered and solved in the villages run by the Jehovah's Witness and Baptist missions.

Prior to the cyclone, when Atoifi had been held hostage, many of the neighbouring villages had also to endure the hardships imposed by the Fandanga chief and his warriors. Fear was once again felt when the previous election was declared invalid. A new date was set,

but not long after this change, there was a meeting of the Fandanga up in the hills behind Atoifi.

Later on that same day, the man who had been accused and later acquitted of the murder of Brian Dunn came rushing into the office, saying, "I must see Dawson now. It's very urgent."

My accountant, Henry Zonga, as ever was cautious and at first refused this request. Finally, he yielded to Susu's plea on the condition that a couple of other people be allowed to come with him. He agreed to this and was brought into my office, saying, "Dawson, the Fandanga has come up with a new plan. He had given his word to the prime minister that they would never again hold Atoifi hostage, but now he has a new plan, and that is to kidnap you and hold you hostage."

This plan fortunately was thwarted when Cyclone Namu intervened, and the new election date had once more to be changed.

Now it was different story. It had been important to me that anything that we were able to obtain in the way of food, clothing, and fuel was to be shared with our friends in the neighbouring villages. Even our persecutors had their needs supplied, and because we had fed them through this time, we had no need to fear anymore. By their own code of conduct they would in fact now protect Atoifi if any trouble occurred during the election.

The prime minister had assured me before our return to Atoifi that protection would be provided if another election was called. True to his word, three days before the due date, an army general along with a number of sharpshooters arrived armed to the teeth. On his arrival he demanded that he take over one house, which had a commanding view and was a key position for security.

The expatriate visiting doctor staying in this house was not impressed when he had to be relocated. The general set up his defence post, but thanks to Namu it was not necessary. However, it was greatly appreciated that the prime minister had kept his word to me.

A few weeks later whilst I stood in a queue at the post office in Honiara, a large hand was placed on my shoulder. I turned to see the owner of this hand, who said, "Good morning, Ira. Did my men look after you over at Atoifi during the by-election?" There was the prime minister, and it was my pleasure to thank him personally for the care that he had shown to us.

The Fandanga chief and his rebel group would no longer worry Atoifi or threaten to kidnap me again. Their words are here quoted: "We were their enemies, and they fed and clothed us. No one of us must ever threaten Dawson and the hospital again."

CHAPTER 7

The Australian high commissioner was delighted to have a part in this experience. "Get what you need, send me the account, and keep me informed of progress." After my return from the visit into the hills with the cannibals, it was arranged that representatives from each of the villages should come to Atoifi to receive the supplies requested.

On the appointed day they duly arrived, but not without causing some consternation with certain villages through which they passed. However, after going through the strict formalities of the right of way, all was well. This meant that one person had to go to the village chief, inform him that they were passing in peace, and return to the group. Then all would pass by the village safely.

At the hospital all the requested supplies had been set out on the basketball court in piles for each village. Never had there been such a scene; no pushing or shoving, all 150 visitors quietly waiting their turn to receive. Everyone was extremely grateful for their gifts and came by to express their thanks, even though we couldn't understand a word of their language. Later it was pointed out to me that this was the first time they had ever received anything as a gift.

For the next eighteen months they continued to receive food supplies, and the women carried over nineteen tonnes of rice plus other food up to their villages until their new gardens began to produce food once again.

When the hospital insurance money was received, it was decided that as the cyclone had damaged our overhead power lines, it would be prudent to replace them with underground cables. With the assistance of an expat electrician from Honiara, the equipment needed was ordered and in time arrived at Atoifi.

Of course, a large amount of trenching had to be done. Usually, local villagers would do such a job for a price. Not this time, though; all the men were busy rebuilding their own villages. Who could we get to do this work? One day, during a visit for supplies from “my cannibal family”, as they had been nicknamed, the question was put to them. “Would you like to dig the trenches for our new power lines?”

How silly this must have sounded. They didn’t know what a trench, shovel, or pick was, let alone power lines. Eventually they were given a practical demonstration of what was required, and they caught on fast.

The matter of payment seemed to pose a problem. They knew of shell money needed to buy a wife but had no use for this thing we called money. Paper for money? No way!

We knew how much it was going to cost to dig the kilometre and a half of trench half a metre deep and half a metre wide. The local men had said that with ten men it would take two weeks, which seemed fair, knowing the speed at which they usually worked.

A different deal was then struck in another way: “By dividing the amount of money by the number of men digging, you can have the value in food or goods from our hospital store.” This was readily agreed to.

All ten men arrived on the appointed day, the trench was marked out, and they started into it. No one had ever taught them about leaning on a shovel. Never around here had anyone seen men work so fast, and they completed the work in less than five days, with straight sides and level base. They returned home very happy with all their supplies; some even had to send for helpers to come down to transport their goodies home.

A few weeks after this first trip into the hills, a report was personally delivered into the hands of the Australian high commissioner. He was excited about the happenings and wanted to know every detail. The money supplied from his funds had long since been paid to cover the costs of the items purchased.

The assistant high commissioner, Mark, was invited to sit in with us. After listening to the report, Mark eagerly asked, "Do you think it would be possible to arrange for me to accompany you on your next trip up there?"

Until then, a time for a second visit had not been thought out, but here was an opportunity too good to miss. "Give me some dates when you could be available and I'll see what can be organised."

It took no time at all for Mark to produce suitable dates, and together we chose one, which would enable him to fly in the evening before an early morning departure. A total of three days would be required, one to walk up, one for the stay, and one to walk back. Mark was several years younger than me, appeared fit, and of course was extremely keen for the adventure.

Back at Atoifi, plans were now being made for this trip. It was time to include others, and the question arose, "Do you think there would be any nursing staff who would volunteer for such a walk, being aware of the possible dangers? It would be helpful too if we had both male and female nurses, as probably the bush women would not welcome being examined by a male nurse."

It was agreed that volunteers would be called for from amongst the national nurses to ascertain their response to this challenge. Next day, the assistant director of nursing reported back, "I have as many as you are prepared to take. How many would you like?"

"Would you like to come, Benny?"

"Of course, and how about we take another male nurse who understands much of their language. I think Unity, the fittest of the females who have volunteered, would be the one to make up the number, along with Betty, your secretary, who could write up the records."

We sent the message via the next group coming down for supplies that our visit would proceed on the date just two weeks away. A few days later Silas would make his first trip down to Atoifi arriving with some other chiefs from his region. We met together to discuss the trip.

"You must be aware that when I come on this next trip, the assistant Australian high commissioner would like to come with me. He is a man of great importance. While you cared for my safety, you must be even more protective of him. I would like to bring some male and female nurses if you agree, and they will bring medicines and care for your sick people. Would it be possible to guard them and care for the safety of all these people?"

After some discussion amongst themselves, Silas came back and answered, "A group of warriors will be sent to protect you all. I will come and be sure everyone does his job in protecting you."

Mark arrived on the appointed day and Silas, and his men were there ready to go. Daylight saw us all up at the front of the hospital. It looked as though Silas had brought an army with him, each one having a particular place and job to do. Some were to act as porters, and four women had come to care for our two females.

We were lined up with the chief bowman as leader, holding a handful of arrows and his bow; the chief spearman carrying two heavily barbed spears, followed by a man with a bush knife, then me. After that came another bowman and spearman followed by Mark, along with this pattern continuing with our four nationals strategically placed amongst them. The four ladies were behind our two girls, and the file ended with the porters followed by another bowman and spearman to guard our rear. What a sight we were as we left the hospital and walked up the middle of the airstrip and past some local villages at the base of Hill One.

This walk was marginally better than the first, as the track was less slippery, and the river had fallen to about half its previous depth. All was going well, and we had started the climb on Hill Three when an abrupt signal was given to be quiet and halt.

“What’s on?” Mark whispered to me.

“I’m not sure, but keep low in case there is trouble.”

A few seconds later a man coming from the opposite direction appeared on our path. Within a split second the front bow man had an arrow ready to fire. Words of challenge were exchanged, and apparently a satisfactory response was received, easing the tension, as people had been warned not to use that path on this day. After the man had passed, Mark asked me, “How good are these fellows with shooting their arrows?”

“Why not ask him?”

A spot on a tree some fifty metres away was designated as the target, and I was instructed to give the signal. Following my “Go,” the arrow was in the bow and shot away from waist height hitting right on target. “I feel really safe now,” Mark whispered as we moved on.

Soon after that occurred one of the strangest things that either Mark or I had ever seen. We had come to where another path branched off from ours, and here we were all halted as one of the warriors was dispatched down it. About ten minutes later we heard a voice speaking but could see no one. Our nurses were standing close by at this time as we had broken ranks whilst we waited.

Then we noted to our utter amazement the chief bowman cupped his hand close to his mouth and spoke. “What’s going on?” I asked the male nurse, who understood some of this language.

“The voice you first heard and were looking to see where the speaker came from was that of the warrior who left us some time ago. He is now at the point a long way away where that path rejoins this one and is speaking with his dead ancestors, from whom the message is being relayed. What you are really hearing is of the devil; we are truly with devil men in devil country.

The signal was given for us to continue along our path, and fifteen minutes later we met up with our warrior, who was waiting for us to pass this place. All this had been done to ensure that no enemy was hiding up along the other path ready to attack from the

rear. Yes, they were doing their best to protect us and see that no enemies were lurking nearby.

All of us felt weak, and it was becoming obvious that this day's journey was taking longer than expected. Eventually we pushed out of the jungle on top of Hill Four. We decided to move around a ridge, to make us some time. This would be longer but easier walking than continuing down the valley and climbing up to Hill Five.

This path was much better, and we were all happy with this decision. However, after some time of enjoying this somewhat easier walk, I began feeling a cramp in my thigh, which was neither normal nor pleasant. What a place and time to get cramps, as we still had about two hours of walking, and darkness would be starting to settle in by then. Eventually the cramp became so painful that we had to stop for a short break, after which it felt a little better and it was "up and at it" again. Not for long though, and noticing that the sun was falling lower in the west, I suggested that it would be better if they continued, allowing me to follow when I could.

Silas replied through the translator that this was out of the question. "If we leave you here, some enemy may find you. Some of us will go ahead and make preparations while the majority will wait until you are able to move."

It took quite some time, and just as the last rays of the sun were falling below the western horizon, we saw the huts ahead of us. Some of those who had gone ahead now came rushing out to meet us with the instruction, "Just wait here a little minute."

Shortly, all was revealed. A large sheet of plain paper had been carried up from Atoifi, and there before us was a printed message of welcome. It certainly took us by surprise that they would go to all this trouble to make us feel welcome to their world. Two extra huts had been constructed since my last visit—one for sleeping quarters and one to be used for the clinic.

We all appreciated being able to sit down and rest our weary feet; even Mark remarked that he was really thankful for the enforced rests brought about by my cramping.

When we joined the group for the evening meal of food, which had been prepared for us from rice sent up earlier, along with pineapples carried by our porters, there were the usual announcements to be made. First came official words of welcome from Silas and another chief on whose land the extra huts had been built. Then, though we really didn't need to hear it, came word that an official welcome programme was to be presented for us tonight. No further information was given, and we would just have to wait and see. One of our group jokingly remarked to me, "Make sure they all have plenty to eat at mealtime."

A few things such as salt and eating utensils were missing, but large leaves served as plates, and besides, "fingers were made before forks." All readily ate the meal, but we would have preferred to be able to slip away and lie down until daylight.

Of course, we could not offend our hosts, and the instruction passed to our group was that "all must attend." Finally the surprise time arrived. Again appropriate words of welcome were expressed, to which it was truly a pleasure to respond. Now for their surprise: a musical evening of entertainment.

It was quite unbelievable what was produced as instruments. Some were a little like panpipes but producing only a few notes. A rhythm group of women each carried a pad—about ten centimetres of large leaves woven and twisted into a nearly square flat object. This was a comfortable size to hold firmly into the palm of the hand and rhythmically slap onto the thigh. The sound was unique, as we had never heard anything like it before.

After just a few minutes Mark leant over close and whispered to me, "Where did they ever get to hear this beat they are playing? It's the same as what we call rock and roll. Perhaps they invented rock and roll, and civilization has just caught up with them."

As the night wore on, so did the music, but a change was taking place. The rhythm was changing to a different beat, and instead of the performers just sitting quietly playing their music we could now see them getting wound up. In fact, what we were seeing was

beginning to frighten us, as their friendly expressions had now been replaced with hard, stony faces.

"We had better be ready to take our leave" was the word passed through our group.

"I'll make an excuse to our translator, and we'll be on our way."

We sent our thanks through the translator for the music and kindness that had been expressed. He conveyed that we were all very tired and were now going to our huts. He passed back their answer, which surprised us all. "It is very wise that you should leave now, as the music has them stirred up. This is what they do before going out to kill."

With these words ringing in our ears, we were all very glad to rest our weary bodies on the floor of our rooms in more ways than one.

A new day dawned with a cloudless sky, and soon the sun's rays were warming us up. First some food, and then it was time for the clinic staff to do their work. Hundreds of people came by, as everyone wanted to see what this silver thing did that was attached to the nurses' ears.

During this time Mark and I were trying to get the background information required for his report. An old, old man walking with the aid of two sticks came up to us wearing only an old khaki singlet more full of holes than material.

"There could be an interesting story here, Mark. Let's go and see if we can find out what it is. How would he have obtained what looks like an army ration singlet up here?" We sat down together with the old man by our side and heard a translation which went something like this.

"Many long moons ago a big bird came and flew over us, and what appeared to be a tree fell out of it. When it touched the ground, there was a man wearing clothes all this colour. As there were a number of us, we divided these up, and this has never been off my body since. We then ate the man and were well fed."

This translates to what is thought to be a plane crashing during the Second World War, with the pilot parachuting out. Whether the pilot was alive or dead on landing I cannot tell, but it was obvious to us that the old man had worn the singlet ever since.

There were never any troops fighting on Malaita Island during the war, with the closest action being on the Florida Islands, where the old capital of Tulagi is, and the heaviest on Guadalcanal, so we can only assume this poor unfortunate pilot was off course. Unfortunately, I never saw the old man again, as he had died before my next visit there.

The clinic staff worked all day, with many sick people receiving healing treatments. By now the chiefs were ready with their requests, which were that we help them to have a school and a clinic set up in their area. We would be glad to grant them this simple request, but time would be needed to find the person who could speak their language and have the skills to treat simple medical needs and be able to teach their children.

This person would need to be accepted by them and be willing to live up there with them. We promised that we would do what we could, and fifteen months later this promise was kept.

Arriving back at the hospital late on the third day, everyone was exhausted but excited and delighted about their experience. Mark returned to Honiara, prepared his report, and sent over copies of the photos he had taken.

Of all the experiences that this book contains, the invitation to visit with these folk would be the most rewarding. These once-feared people really became dear friends.

Dr. Douglas Pikacha, a former Atoifi doctor now working for the Government hospital, accompanied us on the third visit to rectify the situation of the census being conducted. Actually, before our visits no one really knew that people were living in that region, but after Douglas's visit, they would now be counted on the official records.

Problems always appear just as things seem to be going well. Now Peter, as we knew him, the son of Silas, was brought down to the hospital very sick. It had taken nearly three days to carry him over the treacherous tracks and through the swiftly flowing river. He was diagnosed as having at least three fatal diseases. This was not good, and his health was showing no signs of improvement despite the nursing care he was receiving. Silas and the family would take him outside, away from the hospital buildings, and carry out some witch doctor rituals, none of which did anything to help. Peter was becoming weaker by the day, taking no food and drinking almost nothing. Only the intravenous drip was keeping him alive.

After a fortnight of this, Benny, the national assistant director of nursing, advised me of the medical situation and asked me to go to Silas and speak with him. He asked me, "Will you ask Silas if we can ask our God to heal his son?" Of course I would, and Silas and his family then moved away from the hospital precincts for a family conference. It was no little thing we had asked them to consider. Finally he returned, saying, "Yes, Dawson, we would like you to ask your God of Atoifi to heal our son."

It was Wednesday, and at the church each Wednesday evening we held a prayer meeting. That night, all present were informed of Peter's critical situation and that Silas had asked us to pray for healing for him. Earnest prayers ascended to heaven that night as we poured out our request to the Master Physician.

It was the custom of many of us at the conclusion of the prayer meeting to visit in the hospital, and when we arrived at the male ward, what a surprise met our eyes. There was Peter sitting up in bed and eating food. From that very night he made a full recovery. To God be the glory; great things He can do. In less than a week Peter walked home.

Some weeks later, on Friday evening as we were to leave for the opening of sabbath service, there was a knock on our door. Here were a number of men from Silas's village, and the news they brought was not good. They wanted me to send a radio message, to

be broadcast over national radio, that “Silas, hem e close up dead finis. Please come.” This message was to tell listeners to prepare to come to attend his funeral. In pidgin, “dead a little bit” means quite ill; but “to be close up dead finis” means the end is near.

On our arrival at the church, the message was given that Silas was dying, and so once again a special prayer service was conducted, asking if God in His wisdom would heal Silas. Benny, the assistant director of nursing, along with another Benny who could speak a little of the language spoken in Silas’s village, volunteered to leave at daybreak to go and render some assistance.

Late in the afternoon they arrived at Silas’s house but found it empty. Thinking they had arrived too late, they began to look around to see if there was anyone who could tell them of Silas. A little way down the hill they noticed a man working in a garden, so they went towards him to enquire about Silas. To their utter surprise and amazement, the man was Silas himself.

“Silas, we heard you were close up dead finis. What are you doing in the garden?”

“Last night when big fella sun go down, you down at Atoifi ask Him big fella God belong Atoifi to heal me, didn’t you?”

“Yes, Silas, that is true, and by the look of you, He answered our prayers.”

No medical attention was required, and our two nurses came back to Atoifi rejoicing and sharing the good news.

CHAPTER 8

The “commander of the Atoifi submarine corps” was the name I quietly carried for a number of years after the incident mentioned in chapter three. Over these years many other strange and frightening things were to happen, until ultimately the real story could be told to the other expatriate workers.

Our hydro generator was about a kilometre from the hospital, and a tractor could use with some difficulty a partially developed track to transport heavy equipment to the site. A source of water flowed down from a kilometre further on, and it was about one hundred metres along this section that a former business manager had lost his life when the tractor capsized, killing him.

As funds became available, a new shed and a new generator replaced the original one which used too much water for the power it produced. The same amount of power was generated using a third of the water. However, more changes were needed to allow it to automatically shut off when the water supply ran out. So until these changes could be made, it would be still necessary to go up and shut off a valve to prevent the water running through while the top tank was refilling.

Normally this would happen at night. I chose to go, even though everyone kept telling me that I shouldn't go alone. It was on one such night as I returned under the light of the stars, which with no pollution in the air were shining in all their glory, I was stopped

dead in my tracks as the image of a person went across in front of me. This apparition seemed to mount a small bank, sit in front of a lighted fire and I could clearly see the whites of his eyes and the palms of his hands. It was impossible for me to lift my feet and move on. Then, just as quickly as it appeared, it was gone—and so was I! During the next few months I encountered this again. It was frightening, but I felt that I couldn't let this beat me, so I continued on my nightly vigils.

One Saturday night about nine thirty as the hydro went off and the diesel started up, I commenced to walk up the path. Nearing the place where I had experienced the above happenings, I was overcome with the feeling that someone was behind me. I slowly stopped and swung around, and by the light of the stars I could see the outline of a person some fifty metres away carrying some kind of a blade in his hand.

What to do? There was still about three quarters of a kilometre uphill to the relative safety of the shed. Back to the hospital was the closest, so I needed a plan. I turned and slowly walked towards the person with the torch hidden, until only a couple of metres separated us. There I switched it on, flashing it right in his eyes, thinking that this would give me a few seconds' start on him back to the hospital.

Imagine my relief when I recognized Isaiah, one of my caring workers who was following me to make sure no harm came to me. Grateful to see it was Isaiah, I quickly tried to explain my strange actions. Oh, how stupid they must have seemed to him.

He kindly assured me that he fully understood, and then we discussed what had previously happened to me near that spot. "That's why mi pella never come alone up here. We too have seen that devil man."

* * *

The arrival of a new motorbike more suitable for the terrain gave one a feeling of security. A bright headlight meant that all around

was lit up, rather than having to rely on starlight. Care had to be taken when the track was wet and slippery, but with rain there was no need to worry about the water supply. We considered it a drought though if rain had not fallen for three weeks.

Myra was away in Australia, and there having been no rain for some time, every morning about one o'clock when the diesel switched over, it was necessary to go up and switch off the valves. I now had a chair to sit on whilst waiting for the top tank to refill, after which the turbine could be restarted.

Because of the steepness from the track to the shed it was easier to leave the bike on the path and walk up. This had been the pattern for nearly two weeks until one night, when I was half asleep, a noise like the wind at the door aroused my senses with a start. There was no wind and no sound of movement in the nearby bushes. When I went to the door and flashed my torch, there to my utter amazement stood a man.

"What are you doing here?" and with that, he just disappeared. Quickly, I started the hydro and left. Rather than stay for the hour the next night, I decided it prudent to return to the house and wait out the hour there. Having left the bike in the usual place and walked to the shed and started the turbine, I returned to where the bike should be. To my surprise it was not there, and on shining the torch around, thinking someone was playing jokes with me, I saw unbelievably that there was the bike with no rider, going along the road about thirty metres ahead.

As I started running after it, having decided that it was going no further without me, there was another strange happening: the bike suddenly rose in the air and went over the bank. Now it was resting in the bushes below the track, but I thought, *This is not going to beat me, but take me back to the hospital it will!*

It was then, as a horrible smell of death assailed me, that I realised that every time when these experiences happened they were accompanied by the same smell.

Now to get this bike up. I placed the torch where it would provide the best light and made my way carefully down. As if by a signal the torch went up in the air and crashed down, leaving me in total darkness. Not even the stars seemed to be helping me tonight.

What's happening to me? Have I gone troppo? went through my head. *This can't be for real, it has to be a nightmare*, but no, it was no dream. I cried out with fear, "Please, Lord, help me, please get me out of this mess." I pulled myself together and somehow slowly inched the bike up and back on the track. What a relief it was to just sit on it for a few seconds; and amazingly it was still in gear.

"How could it possibly have moved along like that?"

I had barely enough strength to push the starting pedal down. What a feeling of elation went through my body as the motor burst into life at the first attempt, and I was on the way to the safety of the hospital.

Reflecting on what had happened I decided not to mention this to anybody at the time. It was just unbelievable. Arriving as usual for morning worship, I took my seat, then noticed Isaiah coming towards me with my torch in hand.

"Come outside. I must talk with you. Did you have trouble with the devil man last night?"

"What makes you ask that?"

"I saw where you had big trouble last night. You did, didn't you?"

"Well yes, you could say that."

"We will talk more with other workers after worship."

After worship, a group gathered asking that all be recounted of last night. I fully expected them to say that it was all in the imagination, but their reaction was quite the opposite. It became obvious that each of them also had stories to tell. They pointed out to me that they had told me not to go to these places alone and had been waiting to see how long it would be before I had trouble. Then someone else said, "You didn't slip out of your boat, when you first arrived here did you? The devil man threw you down into the water, didn't he?"

"Yes, it was just as you say, but who would have believed me then?"

"We would have, because we too have had similar experiences. Now, Dawson, you must not go up there to the hydro alone. Motorbike or no bike, someone must go with you."

In hindsight it is hard to believe how reluctant one could be after this talk, when one of the student nurses volunteered to accompany me that night, saying, "I'll know when the lights go out and come to meet you at the diesel shed, and we'll go up on the bike together."

"Thank you, Peter. That will be great. It's usually about two o'clock." But for some unknown reason the pattern changed, and the lights went out just before midnight. As usual I started off and waited at the appointed place, but no Peter came. After waiting a few minutes with a no-show, my thoughts took over and caused me to think that nothing ever happened so early. Really, not wanting to be beaten by this problem and not wanting to awaken Peter, I decided to go on up, put the bike closer to the shed, and do what had to be done quickly.

I followed the plan and returned to the bike very quickly. As I sat on the seat, my eyes were drawn to the form of a man standing about an arm's length away. This was different from anything else before. This form was not of a national, but of a man who had previously been accidentally killed right here. Fear and fright that could not be imagined washed over me. My arms and legs turned to jelly, and all that held me up was the fact that I was actually sitting on the seat.

Then, this apparition spoke to me, and every word is still etched on my mind. "Ira, you must not go up into the hills anymore." Even though in real life this man and I had never met, there was no doubt who was speaking. In trying to leave this situation my hand went out instinctively to the switch. Immediately, a finger came out and switched the motor off. Again the repugnant smell of death met my nostrils. Down towards the hospital, a brightening finger of light soon became a torch with a real person carrying it. I returned my gaze to where the man had stood, but he was gone. Now I was as a

crumpled heap of human flesh sitting there when Peter flashed his torch on my face and saw my distress with tears streaming down my cheeks. He put an arm around my shoulders asking, "The devil man has visited you and spoken to you, hasn't he?"

A nod of the head was all the acknowledgement needed. No further words were spoken as we rode together back to the hospital. The bike was put away, and for more than an hour I had no strength to move further than the bottom step of my house.

Tonight the devil had spoken to me through the form of a man who we all knew had been killed just a short distance from the hydro shed and was buried overlooking the harbour awaiting the resurrection morning.

Peter shared his part in the experience amongst other workers and now everyone wanted to hear from me; but not today, it would have to come later. Those who had passed on warnings to me just twenty-four hours earlier were very kind, with not one saying, "We told you so." Everyone knew that a lesson had been learnt tonight and left it at that.

When some days later the full story was recounted, I learnt from Wicky, the head man of the outside workers who was present at the time of the accident, the exact nature of the accident, which corresponded with the manner of the form I had encountered.

It was considered safe to go up in daylight hours, so on one early afternoon I was riding into the area where the other incidents had occurred. Without warning, with the back wheels skidding and unable to go forward, the bike was stopped. Straddling it with my feet out each side to keep it upright I felt pressure being applied pushing me further over on to the exhaust. No way could this force be countered, over and over, nearer and nearer to the exhaust went my leg. Finally the leg was pushed onto it, and the scars are still there to this day.

CHAPTER 9

Four years had now passed, the hospital finances were in good shape, and all debts had been paid up. The president of the Malaita Mission knew of the blessings which had led to the success of Atoifi and asked if assistance could be afforded to the vocational school of Afutara, which now had a debt of eleven thousand dollars. I answered, "Ask the Union president, then get it approved through the relevant committees, and it will be my pleasure to assist you."

This school took in students who had been unable to pass the entrance exams into high school, thus giving them a chance to learn some skills which would be useful in providing them with a living in the future. It was located down the west coast of Malaita, a very pretty place but difficult to arrive at. Years before there had been a road for part of the way, but this had been neglected, and now the only way was to go by boat or more usually by canoe.

In due course all approvals were given, and Myra and I took the opportunity to visit on our way home for holidays. This would allow me to see the school, find out some of the problems, and give serious thought during our holiday to solving them.

Now, to get there it would be necessary for us to fly from Atoifi to Auki on the opposite side of the island, be picked up in the mission truck and taken to the wharf, and meet a canoe from Afutara. All

went to plan, and soon we were enjoying the idyllic trip through the Langa Langa lagoon.

Like all good things, this came to an end after an hour. Before we left this calm water, it was necessary for the fuel tank to be topped up before entering the much rougher waters which lay ahead. It didn't take long for us to see the wisdom in that manoeuvre, as the waves now were more than three metres high, not at all pleasant in a fibreglass canoe.

The driver tried to keep as close to shore as was practical, being just at the line where the waves broke. Every time we came to a change of direction along the coast the waves were very steep and close together.

Myra had never been a good sailor and was dosed up with seasickness tablets before leaving home. In fact, we think that she was probably a little "high" on these, as the roughness of the seas was really trying her out. She "fed the fish" and was sprayed mercilessly by these waves.

What a trip. At times we wondered if we would survive it, but eventually we arrived, soaking wet with a very sick wife. Now another new experience awaited us. There is no marine berth to come into; the canoe circles around in front of the school until some senior students hear the motor. Those appointed sprint down to the water's edge to await the landing. The driver on seeing the boys standing ready catches a wave and rides it in. Before the next wave can hit, the boys pick up the canoe and its cargo and lift it onto the shore. Then you know that you have arrived.

Afutara is a beautiful place with a pebble beach, conducive to sitting on the shore and watching the sun sink slowly over the sea that spans the sixty kilometres between Malaita and the southern end of Guadalcanal. But we were not there for that, so it was time to look around.

The land is flat, being about three metres above sea level, with school buildings and houses dotted around with the usual coconut trees lining the shore and roads. Towards the rear of the property

the land rises to gentle sloping hills, and here the gardens have been planted. There are some other villages within the vicinity but none that you would say are really close.

Before darkness fell there was sufficient time to take a quick walk around the flat areas inspecting the buildings and to get an idea of the layout and what the most urgent problems were.

Some years before, a generator had been supplied, and power had been connected throughout all the buildings. However, as happens, time had taken its toll, and this had burnt out some years ago. Yes, it had been sent to Honiara for repairs, but up until now no one knew where it might be or whether anything had been done about it.

A large number of classrooms were sufficient for the number of students, and this was a school for teaching trades that were required by the country. After an hour or so it became quite clear where the problems lay. A meeting was called with the staff that evening for me to set out my thoughts of how the direction of the school could be changed for the better. They were all excited about what was discussed that night and were prepared to try out the changes.

The next day, I paid a visit to the gardens to check on a few ideas. Then we would meet again with the staff before talking with the students, informing them of what would be required from them if my new concepts were accepted.

We needed to make an early start to leave for Auki in time for us to catch the four o'clock plane to Honiara.

I then presented to the staff the idea that at this time, although the students were being taught trades, no one was producing anything. For the woodworking students, rather than making up small samples of joinery, they would do the same things only now by making saleable items such as chairs, tables, and lock-up boxes of various sizes, for there was a great demand for such things.

Of course the question was asked, "Where do we get the timber from?"

I promised them that on my return I would come by again and arrange all that for them.

Similarly, those doing a mechanics course would not continue dismantling and reassembling an old motor, but would set up a business where local people could bring their outboard motors to be fixed rather than sending them to Auki and waiting weeks if not months for them to come back.

The gardens would be planted with sufficient vegetables to supply their own needs, plus those of a nearby school, which would purchase from them.

Then the home science girls would make bread and buns sufficient to sell to their neighbours and make children's clothes and other household items for sale.

The flour and other supplies to start them on their way were promised on the next supply ship, which would arrive the following week.

We left them, saying we would check on the whereabouts of their generator and that they should have electricity on within three months and the list of things needed to get them started on this new way of learning.

A promise was given that they would be assisted out of the threat of closure due to the present debt. We said farewell for now, and we would see them on our way back in a month's time.

Before leaving for Australia we had time to check on the whereabouts of the missing generator. First stop was to Mike, who did all of Atoifi's electrical work. He told me that he had heard of a generator coming over from Malaita about two years previous to this and suggested a visit to the rewinders, as they may have seen it.

Success: yes, they had it. The work was done and paid for, but they had never been told where to send it back to. Arrangements were quickly made for it to be retested and checked, after which it was to be delivered to the wharf for shipment to Afutara the following week. Arrangements were made with Mike to accompany me when I next visited Afutara.

Now, it was off to Australia for annual self-funded leave for four weeks. Back in the Solomons it was necessary to go straight to

Atoifi as there were matters requiring urgent attention, so it would be another two weeks before we returned to Afutara.

By Sunday evening at Afutara, the lights were back on, and excitement was in the air with everyone saying, "We never thought the electricity would ever be on again."

"Now, let's get the rest of the problems sorted out. How has the baking and selling of bread and buns been?"

"Unbelievably successful. We have almost finished that first bag of flour and have a large sum of money for you to deliver to the office in Auki."

Next morning it was to the gardens, which were showing acres of new cultivation. The mechanics also were very busy, needing a few spare parts in order to have three motors back in service. They too had money to be taken with me. Orders were in for tables and chairs, but as yet no timber had been available.

"The timber situation will be attended to in Auki. Tomorrow you should receive all that is required."

On the way we called in to the sawmill in the Langa Langa lagoon. Timber was selected and would be available for pickup later the same day. Before bidding farewell to the school principal, who was also the canoe driver of the day, there was one important thing to be agreed upon. "You can load up the timber this afternoon, but with such a heavy load, do not leave for Afutara until daylight. OK?"

"Sure, we will not leave until daylight." And with that it was off to the airport for a flight back to Atoifi.

About eleven o'clock next morning, Betty came calling me to the radio. "You are wanted on the radio; it's Afutara calling."

"Ira, it's the principal here. Last night we lost the canoe and most of the timber."

"What? Did someone steal it?"

"No, I thought it would be better to travel by night, despite giving you my word that we wouldn't. We were about ten kilometres away from the school and having trouble rising over the waves. Because it was dark, we hadn't noticed water entering through a slight crack

near the front of the canoe. The drain holes were blocked, and the front of the canoe filled up with water, and it rolled over after being swamped by a large wave. As you know, we travel just outside the breaking of the waves.”

Here I interrupted: “Was anybody hurt?”

“Some coral scratches, but the canoe is broken up, a lot of the timber is lost, and the outboard motor is lying somewhere on the bottom.”

At this moment it was best not to express my feelings, so I said, “Salvage what timber you can, and I’ll get back to you.”

My remarks off air to those standing by and listening were “*Oh oh!* Why do they do these things?”

Then after a moment to collect my thoughts, I said, “OK, let’s fix it.” But how was this to be done, as they only had one canoe and no other way in or out?

Back to the radio, now was the time for some quick action. I called Ray, our accountant in Honiara, and explained the problem to him. I asked if the canoe and motor were insured under the usual policy. He checked this out and came back with the answer that they were. Something was going right for us.

“Will you get on to the local canoe fabricator and see if they have a new twenty-three foot canoe available, like today? Also, check with the outboard motor distributor if there is a new fifteen-horsepower motor in town, and get back to me. Thank you.”

Within a couple of hours he was back to me. “You now have a new canoe and motor. The insurance money should leave enough to cover the freight.”

“Will you please book space for these on the next ship leaving for Afutara?”

This having been attended to, it was now time to call back to Afutara. The principal was waiting in trepidation for this call, expecting to be taken to task for not having followed through on what he had agreed.

"It's all fixed. A new canoe and outboard motor will be arriving on Friday."

"You can't be serious. How can this be when it only happened last night?"

"We are getting it through insurance."

"But when we last claimed on insurance, it was the generator, and as you know, that took over two years."

"It is for real. Just be ready to take delivery of it on Friday this week."

"Ira, when are you going to yell at me for being so stupid?"

"Perhaps it won't be necessary. I cannot imagine you doing anything like that again. By the way, when you have the canoe and motor set up, take it to the sawmill, where there is another load of timber waiting for you."

Each week, over the radio came the reports regarding the progress. Supplies arriving as required, demand for the various products and services were ever increasing, and in due course the garden yielded its produce. Within nine months the debt had been repaid and something they had never before seen was money in the bank. There remained one more thing to do, and that was to improve the transport situation. Too many bridges had been washed away over the years to get a road through, so there was only one other option to explore. Why not go modern and look at the possibility of putting down an airstrip?

Gary, the owner of Western Pacific Airlines, provided me with the measurements required to allow the British Islander to land and take off. Then on the next trip, it was measured out on the level land. Yes, an extra one hundred feet was even available with a hill at one end and the sea at the other.

Enthusiasm ran high from the mission president to the students as the clearing of the land began. But this was too big a job for pick and shovel to level. It was time to call in the "big guns", and just the people to do it were on Malaita close by where the canoe had come to grief. This company was extracting timber and shipping it to

Malaysia with their head office in Honiara. Worth a visit next time in Honiara was my thought, so an appointment with the manager was arranged.

Of course, although happy to receive me he was unaware of what the visit was about. Carefully I outlined the need for better transport in the area of their logging camp and pointed out that in the case of a medical emergency, having an airstrip nearby would be advantageous for all.

“What can we do to help you?”

With a question like that the door had opened. “The use of a bulldozer for a day, transported down from your camp with the aid of your barge. A week later a grader would be needed for a couple of days and would also have to come and go on the barge. This would enable the job to be done in just three or four weeks. Can you help us to get the job done quickly?”

He didn’t even need time to think about it: “You would not want us working on your place on Saturday, so we’ll transport the dozer down on Saturday afternoon arriving at sunset. The driver will be there at daylight and work until he finishes on Sunday after which the barge will bring the dozer back. The same can be done with the grader. Just tell me when you are ready for us.”

This is how the airstrip of Afutara was prepared, and on my final flight out of Atoifi the pilot kindly deviated the flight, did a touchdown and flew on to Honiara. This gesture was appreciated although not really getting to land on what was my privilege to start.

CHAPTER 10

Not far from Atoifi were some quite large villages and often on Sabbath afternoons we would go visiting. Earlier, you have read where Myra had come to grief having fallen off a “bridge” shortly after our arrival. Whenever we had visitors come, these were the two villages close by that people could be taken to. One, named Wyfalonga, was on the harbour; then another two-kilometre walk through the jungle brought one to Ambatona, which was right on the sea.

Sometimes we would be asked to conduct services for them, and quite a number of us would paddle over, as it was only a kilometre across the harbour to Wyfalonga from the hospital. On one such day as we were on our way back, the sun having just set and dusk falling fast, David, the young son of the director of nursing, had chosen to sit out on the front of the canoe. This had been considered safe as the water was calm and the canoe was moving slowly.

David was happily sitting there and singing when a cry of “David” from one of the student nurses rang out as she dived into the water, before any of us had realised what had happened. Narwin had dived into the dark dusky water, as it was now, to try to locate David, who had obviously fallen asleep and slipped into the water. Coming back up for another breath, she was down again and this time, as she clung to the side of the canoe, had her other arm under his shoulder, heaving him up to be pulled in by willing hands. This

was all done so quickly that he hadn't time to realise what had happened and fortunately was none the worse for wear afterwards.

Later on Narwin told of how she could not see a thing in the water, but just as she was about to surface for the second time she felt him with her feet. How glad we all were that the canoe was powered only by muscle power and not horsepower, as the episode could have had a different ending.

Picnics were always a most anticipated and enjoyable event. There were two beaches that were usually chosen for these outings once or twice a year. Lousiana was the closest to Uru harbour, and Leili, with a beautiful coral, was about a twenty-minute canoe ride and the favourite place for hospital picnics on Christmas and New Year's Day. Half the hospital staff would be rostered on each of these days, thus allowing for all to participate on these days.

Snorkelling was the favourite pastime, as this beautiful reef was protected in the shelter of the island. The abundance and colour of the fish, along with the beauty of the coral here, made it a place no one wanted to leave at the end of the day. Because a number of trips were needed to transport all back home, the first trip would be scheduled to leave about three-thirty.

Due to return at this time was a student nurse from Vanuatu, but she could not be found. A number of us set out to find her. Finally, footprints were spotted and thought to be hers; these we followed through bushes until we came back onto the sand where they reappeared very clearly. As no one lived on this island, which consisted mainly of coconut palms, we wondered where she could have gone. The footsteps led us close to the water's edge and then something strange was noticed. A second set of footprints appeared beside hers as she had walked on towards a coconut palm, finishing right there at the palm. "Devil man", exclaimed the search leader. "We must move everyone from the island and then return to look for her; but first we must pray. Pray hard." It did not look good when it was revealed that this girl's family background was involved in devil worship.

The canoe with the last of the students and staff had just left with instructions for the driver to return with torches for those of us who had remained. We had only covered a short distance when we saw someone come out of the jungle onto the beach. Coming closer, it was obvious that here was our missing student, but she did not recognise us, and her speech and demeanour were those of someone we didn't know. While it was a happy ending to have her back that day, the end of her story is not so happy.

A few days later she chose to leave for Honiara and never completed her training with us. Help was sought for her and some months later the devil possession which had taken hold of her that day was removed, and she finished her training in Honiara.

To you my reader this may seem as a strange happening, but regrettably not so strange in some of these areas where the devil man even has the power to call up the sharks.

* * *

As in all walks of life, when top personnel change, so do ideas, and not always for the better. A new president was appointed in Honiara, and the previous one who had requested our appointment had been called back to Australia. This new man had a different way of running things, which was foreign to the ways of Atoifi. At one time he made arrangements for someone to come out from Australia to look at some of the hospital equipment. This was unnecessary and had not been passed by the hospital board; yet in due course the hospital received a large account for transport and accommodation. We refused to pay this, and eventually it had to come out of funds under his control. From that day on, it became clear that my days were numbered.

The tide had turned financially. Whereas on our arrival Atoifi had a huge debt, now five years later it had a surplus budget, its frozen debt was repaid, and all reserves were in bank accounts. In

fact, Atoifi now had more in cash than it had inherited in debt at the time of our arrival.

Now at the Australian headquarters a decision was made that an expatriate budget had to be cut. This provided an excellent opportunity to make the business manager redundant. At Atoifi this was considered to be so unfair that the expatriate doctor and other staff volunteered to go, but no; it had to be the manager's position that was to be the position to be made redundant at the end of the year.

The announcement shocked the whole of the Malaita mission, and despite many appeals from people in high places, even to parliamentarians the decision would stand, and it did.

About three weeks before the end of the year, the president was arriving to attend the last board meeting. Now I was very surprised to see my friend Silas Nika had arrived and was at the hospital on the day of the meeting.

"Is someone ill? What brings you here today, Silas?"

"Dawson, you know that we don't want you to go, and we have come down to help you fight off this bad man!"

"Silas, there isn't really any way you can help, he's made up his mind, and that's that."

"Oh no! Dawson, it's not. You have kept us alive with food when all others, even our own government didn't help us. Now it is our turn to care for you. We have come here today to kill this man!"

What a problem faced me now. Silas in good faith was telling me how he felt and wanting to show, by the only way he knew, how to deal with his problems.

Taking Silas and his warriors to one side, I slowly and carefully explained to them that this was not the way to handle this problem. Finally they accepted what I was saying, but they let me know in no uncertain terms that they didn't think much of our way of doing things: "No wonder you people have continuing problems. At least we get rid of ours! Dawson, you must come up again, one more time

before you leave.” As far as I am aware, that man does not know that I actually saved his life that morning.

Silas and his group were all there to escort us up to the hills for my last visit with them. We had a medical team and a young man as a teacher from a coastal village who had some ancestral connection with these people. It was a very sad time, bidding farewell to these who were previously cannibals, but now my true friends.

That last night turned into a very formal occasion, with various chiefs making speeches which brought me to tears at times. Remember that at this time I was unaware of what had happened that first trip almost eighteen months earlier. Cannibals were telling how much they loved me because of what I had done for them. One could easily think they were hearing quotations from the Bible when they said, “We had no one to care for us, and you came. Our bodies were cold when all the vegetation had been removed, and clothes were given to us. Our people were hungry and sick and when others refused, you gave us food from under your house and are still supplying our needs. You brought people to help our sick, and now you have brought us a young man who can speak our language and will stay and teach our children.”

The lanterns were not showing much light as we sat around the edge of one of the huts, which was a good thing as my tears were better hidden that way. Now with the many speeches finished, it was time for me to receive a presentation; but what would they have for me? you may well ask. I too was wondering what it would be.

Now the moment had arrived with Silas, the paramount chief, being the last to speak for the night and to make the presentation. As he carefully unwrapped it from jungle leaves, I still didn't know what it was. Then came the explanation. They had already been told that we had no children, but such a thing was incomprehensible to them, and the following words were said: “Now dear friend Dawson, this will save your son's life. If he ever wanders off with a girl, and you have to buy her for him, this shell money will pay the price her parents ask.” More shell money followed with the explanation that

if I should ever have need of another wife, there was sufficient shell money here for the purchase.

These valuable gifts were of so much importance to them, and given with real love and sacrifice, that when the time came for me to respond, my voice again choked up with emotion. This whole experience of the past eighteen months had made our living in the Solomon Islands worthwhile.

This new young man who was to become their teacher and provide for their minor medical needs was kindly accepted, and assurance was given that he would be treated as Dawson's son and a building had been constructed as a classroom. Their journey into civilization had now begun.

* * *

An interesting story came out of the area sometime later through the teacher, and it runs like this. One day there was a group of about two hundred people standing around while some land was being cleared. There was only one big tree remaining to be cut down. When it was almost cut through, a great gust of wind came and blew it the opposite way it had been meant to fall. Now, right in the path of this falling tree was a small child playing, and it was surely going to fall right on the child. The teacher, seeing what was happening, raised his two hands in the air and cried out, "God, save this child!" Two hundred people witnessed as the tree stopped falling when about halfway to the ground, someone rushed in and grabbed the child to safety; then the tree continued on its way to the ground. Silas remarked, "The God of Atoifi held up the tree and saved that child."

That last week at Atoifi was filled with sadness knowing how soon we would be saying farewell to the place we had called home for more than five years.

True, there had been blood, sweat, and tears shed in this place and now with all requests turned down it would be soon time to

leave. Much visiting would be done, as many villagers wanted to bid farewell. Already the final trip to Afutara had been made, and despite the usual rough seas, Myra didn't even get seasick, and to this day she has really not suffered from seasickness since her first "doped up" trip to Afutara.

The vocational school was going well with many new students already enrolling for the coming year. A number of the present students had obtained jobs in their chosen fields in other places. Yes, all was well with Afutara, and now the airstrip was only awaiting landing certification. Here I would like to say, "Thank you, Afutara, for the pleasure you gave us to assist you in some small way."

Visits were made with workers at other Christian villages, with a special invitation from the Catholic priests in Auki to have lunch with them so they could express their appreciation for our assistance at both the time of the evacuation and the rehabilitation after the cyclone. The week flew by, and soon it would be our last night at Atoifi.

* * *

It was now the final night before our departure. Silas and his group had come down to bid us farewell on the morrow. Now their gardens were producing, and life would be a little easier for the women who had carried in over nineteen tonnes of rice during the feeding time. There would however be a change or two, from what Silas had said about human flesh being off the menu from now on.

A knock at the door surprised us, and on answering it an even greater surprise, for there was Silas asking, "Dawson, can I come in. We must talk." You possibly wouldn't be able to understand my surprise at this request, for previously it had definitely been taboo for him to enter this house.

"Dawson, you are my friend. You have supplied us with food and kept us alive all this time. You are my brother, and before you

leave, I must tell you what happened when you first came up to visit us.” These were his opening words.

“As you will remember, I did not come down to escort you up to our hills; we met at the river below Hill Five. I had accepted money to have you killed. The night you slept on your ‘magic’ bed in the hut on Hill Six, we talked about your visit with us. Many of us were of the opinion that you would do nothing for us; no one ever had before; and with the other chiefs it was decided that we would kill you and eat you as you lay there. This would at least give us some benefit from your visit.

“I then passed the killing stick to one of the warriors, who went towards you, but he only reached a short distance when he was somehow forcibly pushed back from you. We then called him a coward and passed the stick to another, whom we also accused of being a coward when he ended up with the same result.

“Next, I decided to do it myself, and taking the killing stick, I went towards you, but at about the same distance from you as the other two, I was pushed back even more forcefully, and my leg shows the mark of where it met the fire. It was then we realized that the God of Atoifi was greater than our gods!” (Remember: that morning I remarked it was great to be alive; see page 43.)

“Yes, Silas, we are brothers and hope we will be throughout eternity.”

Now remembering what my dear mother, who is resting until the resurrection, often used to say, “This boy will never make old bones.” It can be truly said that he has “made old bones”.

The End

FOREIGN AFFAIRS

* * *

FILE No.

607/7/3

801/14/5

DATE

21.11.86

SUBJECT EXPEDITION TO EAST KWAIO HIGH BUSH
AREA - 10 to 14 NOVEMBER 1986

Introduction

1. I participated in an expedition into an area of the high bush of East Kwaio (known as Kwaimoutha) arranged by the Atoifi Adventist Hospital from 11–13 November 1986. The afternoon of 10 November was spent travelling to Atoifi and preparing for the walk. 14 November was spent report writing and returning to Honiara.
2. The purpose of my joining the expedition was to observe at first hand how Australian High Commission relief supplies had been put to use and to witness how a group of previously isolated, warlike and primitive people were attempting to improve their lot by making tentative approaches to the outside world. I was also keen to observe how strong was the influence of the East Kwaio Council of Chiefs (the Fadanga) particularly in its attempts to restrict the participation of the East Kwaio people in national and provincial affairs.
3. The only way into the Kwaimoutha area is by foot (even a helicopter would be limited value due to the lack of cleared

space to land) and involved some extremely arduous climbs. The highest mountain, Hill 4, is approximately 2,800 ft. (See sketch map at Annex 4). Recent rain had made the usually barely distinct tracks very slippery and muddy with a swollen and rapidly moving river to cross another interesting obstacle. The high rainfall in the area encourages lush undergrowth which made movement through it somewhat difficult. Both nights in the bush were spent at BATAFAE, a meeting place (not a village) where conditions were rather basic. The nights were quite cold. 150 people from the 38 villages in the community remained at Batafae for the period of our stay, swelling to approximately 370 on Wednesday 12 November, the clinic day. The people shared with the team members their food (meagre as it was) and their entertainment (a version of panpipes I had not heard before and custom singing).

The People

4. The Kwaimoutha people (a subgroup of the East Kwaio bush people) live between Hills 4 and 7 (bordering on the West Kwaio region; see map). They have resisted incursions from outsiders (which includes people from neighbouring districts) since time immemorial. They are deeply suspicious of others which leads them to live in a constant state of preparedness for warfare. Any movement between areas (as, for example, between their area and Atoifi) requires much planning and cunning and is accompanied by armed warriors always on the alert. Route choices are not disclosed until the last minute, to preserve secrecy. There is a very real fear of attack and ambush, and armed challenges to strangers on the track were commonplace.
5. Villages are small and usually include the members of just one or two families and comprise between ten and 30

people. Settlements are built on hilltops for security which means that they are usually far from gardens and sources of water. There are always warriors on sentry duty during the hours of darkness.

6. Cannibalism is still practised in this and surrounding areas. While I gather its frequency is low these days because there are no longer head-hunting raids into other districts, the constant distrust between areas means that there are inevitably fights in which people are killed. Whenever there is a corpse resulting from a fight, it is taken back to the village and consumed. I was told, quite unashamedly, "If a West Kwaio man came here, we would kill him and eat him, and the same would happen if we went to West Kwaio."
7. Compensation is a well-entrenched custom. We had to pay compensation of two strands of bush tobacco to a landowner when we passed because our party included amongst the bearers a "bubbly" (pregnant) woman. (Incidentally, the bubbly woman could not walk the same track as us and had to shadow the group in the bush. She was also carrying our female nurse's spare dress which was tabu because it was to be used only for visiting the toilet.)
8. The lifestyle of the people is very traditional. Clothes (provided recently by the Atoifi Mission) were worn only because of our visit but some people were clearly uncomfortable in them. One old man's last contact with white people had been with William Bell in 1927 when he was a boy of 10 or 12.
9. Some five or six men in the community had had contact with the outside world. Some had worked for up to 15 years on plantations in Western Province or Guadalcanal. They spoke Pijin and were our main source of communication with the others who only spoke their own version of the Kwaio language. One of our male nurses, a salt water Kwaio and supposedly from the same language group, could not

communicate particularly easily. I had it confirmed from a number of sources that Ira Dawson and myself were the only two white people ever to visit this area. Previous visits by white people had stopped at Hill 4. Those who had not ventured out, therefore, had had no white contact before. (Ira made his first expedition in July 1986).

10. The lack of contact is not limited to white people. Through justifiable fear, other Solomon Islanders including officials from the central and provincial governments have not ventured into the area. Subsequently there are no government services like schools and clinics, the governments have not been able to conduct election ballots in the area and, most recently, the governments have been unable or unwilling to send relief supplies. The people are aware of government and, although they have rejected its incursions in the past, feel resentful that it has not come to their assistance at this time.

The Cyclone

11. The entire area was badly affected by Namu both from wind and rain damage and landslides. A number of deaths occurred as a result of landslides and it would appear that almost all gardens were destroyed. Importantly, there was no official post-cyclone damage survey undertaken of the area and, of course, no government relief supplies were provided and no official request for overseas donor (including Australian) assistance. The RAAF helicopters were not tasked in this area. In the days after the cyclone, some of these people walked to Atoifi with their plea for help which Ira Dawson met assisted by the Australian High Commission Relief Office at Henderson. Since then, supplies of food, tools, cooking pots and clothes have gone into the area from Atoifi supplied from the hospital's own stocks, ADRA in Australia

and the Australian High Commission Disaster Fund. These supplies were spread very thinly, e.g. one axe, one bush knife and one cooking pot per village.

12. From my observations, the supplies had been very well utilised. The axes had been used to clear new areas for gardens and the knives used to cultivate the ground. Before the cooking pots arrived, the people cooked their taro and rice (when they could get it) in hollow bamboo sticks.

Food

13. There is a severe shortage of food. The people are eating taro and kumara almost exclusively. Because of the altitude and variety of crop their gardens have not yet been harvested despite being re-planted very soon after the cyclone. Rice is eaten only when relief supplies are carried in (and only then from the Atoifi Hospital). Of serious concern (attested to by the clinic team) is the lack of protein in the diet. Before the cyclone, fish were caught in the rivers which are now polluted with mud and debris. If the fish ever return it will be a long time away. The people are cooking and eating a type of caterpillar grub which they get off trees but this hardly satisfies the need.
14. There is some corn in the gardens which has a little protein value but the medium term solution would appear to be growing legumes (beans). This was discussed with the elders of the community who agreed to give it a go. I have since spoken to Bob Cogger of NATI who will supply some seed. The short term answer is to supply tinned fish and beef.
15. A considerable area of land is under cultivation, to a large extent helped by our supply of tools (axes, knives etc) following Ira Dawson's first trip in July. While the harvest from these areas is awaited, most food stocks are brought in from other areas. Custom, of course, plays a part in all

aspects of life and I saw gardens of abandoned villages not harvested because they were tabu.

16. Most gardens are affected by a type of worm or caterpillar which eats the leaves of the kumara plants. I brought some specimens back with me and gave them to John Abington, Chief Research Scientist at Dodo Creek for examination by an entomologist. Treatment may pose a problem both from a custom and practical point of view. Abington's suggested treatment is the application of an insecticide which I have arranged with the Provincial Agricultural Officer.

Political Implications

17. There appear to be two political implications of interest occurring in the East Kwaio bush area. The first is that there is a deep distrust and disappointment in the cyclone response from both the central and provincial governments. Government relief efforts have reached far up into the Kwaimbaita River Valley but not up into the bush areas where the people clearly expected relief assistance despite the long history of mutual contempt. Kwaimoutha elders often referred to their disappointment in their "Big Daddy" (the Government). It would appear that the central and provincial governments' punitive treatment of the East Kwaio bush people has been counterproductive. In contrast, the encouragement approach made by the Atoifi Hospital, made at times in direct contravention of government policy, appears to be working as evidenced by the tentative moves by the Kwaimoutha people to make contact.
18. Of perhaps more interest but complementary importance is the apparently diminishing influence of the Council of Chiefs (The Fadanga) and the Paramount Chief, Fololo. The Kwaimoutha were previously under his sphere of influence but have now made a distinct break. Indeed, our expedition

would not have met with the Fadanga's approval. Folofa attempted to call three meetings of chiefs in June 1986 (immediately after the by-election) but none turned up. I think there are three reasons for this diminution of influence. Firstly, the election took place despite the Fadanga's opposition. Secondly, the Fadanga did not offer itself as a substitute "Big Daddy" to Government in providing relief after the cyclone. Thirdly, there proved to be an effective source of relief supplies at Atoifi. With encouragement from Atoifi, including gifts of food, clothes and medical services, the interest of the Kwaimoutha in the outside world (and against the Fadanga) has been aroused.

19. I understand that the recently elected MP for East Kwaio and Minister of the Public Service Mr Daniel Fa'asifobae is suffering from terminal liver cancer and has about 12 months to live. It would be interesting to see if participation in the by-election resulting from his death increases.

Conclusions

20. An encouraging start has been made to improving the living standards of a group of very primitive people. It is still too early to be certain of the long term effect but careful and patient encouragement should see results.
21. The focal point for this "coming out" is the Atoifi Hospital. While this may be satisfactory in the short-term, the hospital would not be able to cope with significantly increased numbers. Hopefully the government would be able to assume authority should numbers increase especially as the influence of the Fadanga decreases.
22. The long term economic solution for the East Kwaio bush people is for them to trade for supplies and for to send their men out to work and remit money. In a farewell speech on Friday 14 November I urged the Kwaimoutha elders

to consider this and not to jeopardise their dignity by continuing their dependence on handouts. They have agreed with an Atoifi offer of short-term work to dig an electrical conduit ditch.

23. In the short-term, before this enormous cultural gap could be reached and before alternative crops can be grown, there is a need to continue relief food supplies, especially food high in protein.

Recommendations

24. The Australian High Commission should continue the measures outlined in paragraphs 14 and 16 above with regard to bean seeds and pest eradication. We should emphasise in our contact with the East Kwaio people that this assistance is in fact coming from the Solomon Islands Government.
25. The Australian High Commission should provide an additional, once-only, cash grant of \$1,500 to Atoifi Hospital from the Disaster Relief Fund to be used for two relief supplies of high protein food—one in December 1986 and one in January 1987.

???

(M.D. Otter)

Second Secretary

Development Assistance

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